Échelle de Cruauté

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Échelle de Cruauté

by The_Clever_Magpie (Metal_mako_dragon)

Summary

"Dr. Robert Hare has created a scale to measure the severity of evil acts. Basing his analysis on the detailed biographies of more than six hundred violent criminals, Hare has created a twenty-two level hierarchy of so called evil behaviour, which loosely reflects the structure of Dante's Inferno. He traces two salient personality traits that run the gamut from those who commit crimes of passion to perpetrators of the worst of acts: sadistic torture and murder. One trait is narcissism, so self-centred they are not able to care about their victims, the other is aggression, the use of power over another person to inflict humiliation, suffering, and death.
The more heinous the crime-and the more rational the criminal-the higher the killer is ranked on the scale. He named it 'Échelle de Cruauté', or 'The Scale of Evil'."
As he lay in his bed, staring up at the ceiling, Will Graham realised there needed to be a twenty third point tacked on the end of the scale. He was sure, somewhere beneath the flashes of memory and the dark calm that descended over his mind, the Ripper would appreciate being so unique as to require a classification all to himself.
(Sequel to Folie à Deux)

Le Monde du Vivre

Chapter Notes

Welcome back followers of the macabre.
So this sort of came pouring out over the space of a few days rather than the space of a few weeks as it was supposed to. I guess even I couldn't wait for everything to come together again into some semblance of order, and for Hannibal to enact his plans, taking them to the next stage.
As ever, feel free to leave comments on anything you wish and point out any mistakes (I try my best but tend to miss them here and there).
Also, I would advise (if you haven't already) reading the previous installment in this series (Folie à Deux) or you'll probably get a bit lost.

Title translation:
"Le Monde du Vivre" - 'The Living World'

The sound of rain against glass and a soft, almost constant hiss. Her eyes felt heavy and the world was dark. She could smell flowers, a sweet, powdery scent. There was something over her face and a rush of air, then nothing, air, then nothing. She forced her eyelids open. It was difficult, more than it should have been. The slits revealed a white ceiling with an offset square of cool brightness set upon it. Sunshine through clouds.

Alana Bloom had an itchy nose.

When she lifted her arm to scratch, it felt as if there were thick hairs wrapping around her wrist and bicep. She shook it wearily and then managed to look down, chin against her chest. She frowned, feeling woozy. Wires, there were lots of wires. At first she thought that her vision had blurred, then she realised, as she began to feel memory creeping up on her, that she was looking down through the opaqueness of a respirator mask.

By the time she had managed to fumble the mask off there was a nurse in her room and the doctor had been called.

“Alana? My name is Doctor Gareth James,” a young face under a crop of dark, black hair said to her, “please relax and let us make you a little more comfortable.”

“Where am I?” she asked, shocked by the whispering sound of her voice; hoarse and barely there.

“You’re in hospital, you were badly injured,” he said as someone began adjusting her bed, tipping her top half up and allowing the rest of the room to come into view, “once we get you sorted I can explain, alright?” she thought she might have nodded but wasn’t sure if the doctor noticed as he turned to the nurse, “Janet, could you get the cart? I want Miss Bloom’s bp and heart rate, and we’ll need a couple of bloods taken.”

The explanation he gave, after they poked and prodded and made sure everything was working properly, began to match up with vague, appalling memories lingering around her consciousness. Funny, considerate Agent Hemmingway was on the floor holding his throat as thick red gushed down his white front. There was someone holding her chin up and a hard plastic funnel was jammed into her mouth while she struggled. She couldn't move her hands and there was a cold, noxious fluid gurgling in her throat.

She felt nurse Janet's hand around hers and realised she was crying, the tears choking as she tried and failed to stop them.

It became a litany of nurses followed by doctors followed by consultants followed by meetings with the physiotherapist. Even being in a coma for only five days, she was told, was something that was going to take a long time to get over.

"You don't just get up and start running around again after a couple of weeks I'm afraid," the Physio, Elaine Barber, said through her thin lips, her mousy brown hair pulled back tight into a bun; her eyes were kind behind her rimless glasses. Alana appreciated that, "it's not like in the movies. But you've done good already, Alana. No kidney damage, minor liver damage, the toxins are flushing out. Now all we have to do is get you back on your feet. Don't think we're starting from base-camp."

"Expecting me to scale the north face?" she huffed out with a hoarse smile, "I'm a lousy climber."

"Oh!" Elaine smiled and laughed loudly, making the small hospital room light up with the sound, "That's great, just what I like to hear. Got your sense of humour back already I see. You're going to be fine, honey. Just fine."

She hadn't been brought in with any belongings and the nurse, Janet, ended up letting Alana use her phone to call her mother (*don't tell anyone I let you,* Janet said, *not even supposed to have it on me*). So then the constant litany was followed by visitors. Her colleagues from the FBI academy, academics, teaching assistants, a few students. Her stepbrother and mother showed up as soon as they could get the flight out. She wished that the reunion could have been under better circumstances and told her frail mother not to cry, she would be ok.

Flowers were brought in and replaced the wilting carnations and roses sitting on her bedside table. On two different occasions Beverly Katz showed up, then Brian and Jimmy from the lab. Neither said anything about the two men she had expected to see before now and Alana didn't ask. She lay there and waited, not knowing why she couldn't voice her fears.

After another two days the knock at her door revealed a welcome sight.

"It is good to see you sensible again," Hannibal's smile had always made her feel a little lighter.

"Have I ever been sensible?" she asked with an awkward smile, sitting up in her bed with a kindle in her hands; her mom had brought it and Alana was glad, '*I know how quickly you get bored hun. Don't want you going crazy before we can get you out of here'.*

She looked behind him for familiar blue eyes beneath unruly curls but the door closed with no one else to show for it.

"Well, I always thought you the most realistic of my pupils," Hannibal said, walking in to sit down on the chair to her right, between the bed and the window; a small Tupperware was placed onto her

bedside cabinet, filled with something which moved like liquid but she could see the chunks.

“Something from your kitchen?” she asked hopefully, distracting herself from asking more pertinent questions, “the food here isn’t anything to rave about.”

“Spinach and chicken potage. All of the iron and protein you could hope for. Honestly? I think it simply warms the soul.”

“I could do with a little soul warming.”

His eyes were clear but something was wrong, she knew, something was off. Alana fidgeted, putting her kindle down by the tub. She rubbed her hands together, fingers cold. Hannibal waited, as if he understood perfectly that she had something on her mind and needed to say it in her own time. He had always been so very patient with her. Supportive and encouraging. She tried to focus on those times as a distraction but it failed miserably.

Why has no one said anything? She thought again and again, Why won’t anyone talk about him? The thought of it made her eyes water slightly until there was a sheen there.

“Hannibal?” she said after a pause, sniffing loudly and hearing the hoarseness in her voice return, “Where is Will? I haven’t heard anything, I thought he would have come to visit. I mean...” she thought of the kiss but knew, she knew, that wouldn’t have kept him away; she looked back to Hannibal who was worrying her with the look of sympathetic grief only just evident on his face, “where is he?” she whispered.

“We...no one knows,” he admitted, clasping his hands and looking straight ahead, staring somewhere in between the wall and the cabinet, “he has been missing for a week and a half.”

“He’s *missing*?” she said, her brow furrowing with worry, “wh-what does that mean, missing? Is he just not picking up his phone? Because, believe me, he’s done that to me before and you really have to hunt him down. I’ve heard, when he gets upset, I mean, he can go under for weeks and...”

A hand on hers. Alana halted her words so quickly that she almost swallowed them. She took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. Hannibal looked weary when she returned her stare to him.

“Jack Crawford believes...” he hesitated again, tipping his head down slightly, “there have been incidents, since you were hospitalised.”

“Gideon?” she asked, having to force the name from her lips quick enough to avoid a memory of grinning teeth.

“No. Let us just say Abel Gideon is lucky to be alive after Will had his way with him.”

“*What?*”

“That is not important, not right now,” Hannibal waved over his loaded statement and continued, “Jack believes that the Chesapeake Ripper is responsible for a set of recent homicides,” Alana swallowed on hearing the name, “at the third crime scene...he found Will’s wallet and identification amidst the bodies.”

For an absurd, frightening moment Alana truly believed that Hannibal would say Jack thought Will had lost his mind and killed someone. It was fleeting and sickening and she berated herself

moments later for even thinking it was possible. Kind eyes and a soft, jerky smile fluttered in her memory. *I never told you how much I cared about you*, she thought as she started to cry, *oh god I never told you*. She did not need to be told, there was only one conclusion left, but Hannibal voiced it regardless.

“He believes that the Chesapeake Ripper has him.”

It was late and Donald Sutcliffe really couldn’t be bothered to stop when he saw the flashing, yellow hazard lights on the road. Just keep driving, he told himself, just keep going and you’ll be home before you know it.

Then, just as he was about to pass, he found himself slowing and pulling in. It was difficult to pass people in need, he thought as she shook his head. He stepped out of his car and looked back at a tall figure approaching.

“Need a hand?” he asked, only just then realising that the vehicle was, ironically, a tow truck; then the figure walked close enough to the light from his car to see and his eyes widened in surprise, “*Hannibal?* Is that you?”

“Donald,” Lecter said in his soft accent that Sutcliffe had always envied for its demure quality, “well this is a surprise.”

“What happened,” he joked, “swap the Bentley for something a bit more practical?”

“Not at all,” Lecter said with a smile, “just something I was going to use and, of course, it breaks down on me. The irony is not lost. You would not, perchance, have jump leads in you boot?”

“Actually no,” Sutcliffe said, “I don’t, sorry. Umm, do you want me to call a service? Bound to be somewhere near.”

“Not necessary,” Lecter said, “I would prefer to see if I can fix the problem myself first.”

“Same old Hannibal,” Sutcliffe said, grinning, “what do you need me to do?”

“If you could take the driver’s seat and turn the ignition when I ask, I would be most obliged,” Hannibal said as they walked back towards the flashing truck, smiling to himself as he added, “I think it might just be a little problem that needs taking care of.”

It had been one month since Jack Crawford had watched Will Graham walk into the crowd, as car horns blared for him to move out of the damn way and the sting of Will’s words still struck at him, and he had decided to put his foot down on the gas rather than follow that retreating back and demand answers. As he sat in his kitchen at four in the morning, eating a hazelnut yoghurt at the breakfast bar, he wished, not for the first time, that he had gone after him and given him a piece of his mind.

Made him go back to Quantico with him, even if it had meant facing up to a review board or worse. At least then, he thought bleakly, he would have been safe.

“You know I thought I was the only one who ate those things.”

Jack turned to look at his wife standing in the doorway, dressed in a light nightdress under a heavy dressing gown; she looked tired, but then Jack couldn’t tell the difference between tired, *sick* and tired, and resigned anymore. He looked down into the empty yoghurt pot, held in both hands, and turned it slightly.

“I hate them,” he shrugged, “but...”

“You were hungry and there was nothing else,” she finished for him, walking to the fridge and opening it; she looked up and down, “I’ll go to the store tomorrow.”

“No, I’ll go,” he said quickly, “I’ve been meaning to, just keeps slipping my mind.”

“Well, there’s a lot on it,” she said, “your mind, I mean.”

He didn’t reply. He knew she didn’t want to hear it. Had probably heard enough of it already. He remembered her face when he’d told her, after a small amount of half hearted badgering on Phyllis’s part, why he hadn’t been home very much recently and, when he had, why all he did was sleep. He wasn’t sure what she would think, whether she wouldn’t care, would care too much, or would judge him as badly as he did himself. Maybe she did all of them, but what she had said struck deeper than any rebuke could have. Four words said in a low voice as she stared at her hands.

“*That poor, sweet boy*.”

Then she had left the room. Left him standing there on his own with the weight of two lives resting on his shoulders. *Not a boy*, he had wanted to tell her, *a man who knew what he signed up for when he took the job!* Desperate words meant to rid him of his guilt. He couldn’t bring himself to say them.

They’d looked back through everything, twice, three times, *four times* over already. Nothing to tell them where Will had gone that night. No sign of his car, no sign of his phone, no sign of just about anything. The hospital had run the blood samples they’d managed to take while Will had been out for the count and had been able to tell them he was suffering from a severe infection but, without further examination, they had no idea where it was stemming from. Beverly had looked back through his medical history but could only see one appointment with a neurological specialist, Doctor Sutcliffe, which apparently hadn’t come to anything.

Smoke and more smoke. Even Abigail Hobbs had been sucked into the void along with Will. One whole month and not a trace of either. He had been over and over in his mind, trying to make his theory of her fit. For a frantic few weeks he had even wanted to pin Will’s disappearance on her as well. Only Will had been right; usually was, irritatingly. Jack couldn’t see her doing the things he had wanted to believe she could. He couldn’t see Abigail as the killer her father had been.

He looked up at Phyllis as she closed the fridge.

Bella, Bella, Bella!

She was still so beautiful to him, no matter what. No matter what happened she would always be the woman who had linked her arm with his as they walked along the promenade and had told him the names of the constellations. His beautiful, bright Bella.

“Hey, c’mere a minute,” he said.

She gave him a small frown but walked over to stand beside him. He reached up and touched her cheek softly before leaning in for a kiss. She tasted faintly of toothpaste. A hand appeared on his shoulder and he leaned back.

“I love you,” he said.

“I know,” she replied tiredly, rubbing his shoulder, “come back to bed. You’ll do no one any good exhausted.”

It wasn’t that he was jealous, not really. His home was just as grand and his car was just as elite, but still, Donald Sutcliffe had to admit that he admired the refined nature of Hannibal Lecter’s house.

“I am sorry, dinner is not exactly to plan,” the door was answered by a subtly flustered Hannibal wearing a chef’s apron beneath a deep maroon shirt; he accepted the bottle of wine offered and motioned for Sutcliffe to enter.

“Did you know you have six dogs in your back garden?” Sutcliffe asked, looking over his shoulder as Hannibal walked into the kitchen.

“I am quite aware,” Hannibal said, a small quirk to his lips.

“Wouldn’t have taken you for an animal lover,” Sutcliffe said, “too many extraneous messes.”

“They do not belong to me,” Hannibal said, “I am watching them for a friend. I hate to ask this of a guest, but would you mind slicing these for me? Finely as you can.”

Very soon Donald found himself cutting green peppers into thin slivers while Lecter busied around the kitchen putting everything together.

“Seems like I’m helping out a lot lately,” Sutcliffe said as he sliced.

“Yes, I am most grateful for your help with the truck,” Lecter said, not even sparing him a glance, “it was fortuitous timing.”

“If that’s what you want to call it,” Sutcliffe shrugged.

A silence which he could only describe as precarious followed his statement. Hannibal pulled a slim rack of ribs from the oven and placed them on the counter before looking up. After a moment’s scrutiny beneath those steady eyes Sutcliffe wished he could just shrug it off. Don’t start what you can’t finish, he told himself sternly, I’m not here to be a dupe.

“Am I wrong?” he pushed further, “Only I read in the newspaper a couple of weeks ago that our mutual friend has conveniently gone missing.”

“I do believe he was friends with only one of us,” Hannibal said, pulling out a large carving knife from a dedicated drawer.

“Don’t beat around the bush, Hannibal,” Sutcliffe said, “Will Graham goes missing and all of a sudden I’m bumping into you on country roads and getting invites to dinner. If you’re worried I’m going to say something to the Feds about our agreement then don’t sweat over it. I’d be in just as much crap as you if I did.”

“It did not cross my mind that you would,” Hannibal said; *bullshit*, Sutcliffe thought, though he didn’t voice it, “but sometimes it is better to test the waters before diving into them.”

“Don’t tell me...” Sutcliffe looked up, “you’re part of the investigation looking for him?”

“I will take it as an insult that you are so shocked,” Hannibal said as he finished his carving (perfectly done, Sutcliffe noted with annoyance), put his knife down carefully and walked around the counter, “Will Graham is a very dear friend of mine. I wish nothing more than to see him safe.”

“If you’re found to have been hiding his illness so you could perform a psychological study, you do realise your career is over, right? Over as in ‘never-coming-back’ over?”

“I am well aware.”

“Wow.”

“Should I even ask?”

“Nothing,” Sutcliffe shrugged, “just that you must be really into this guy to risk it.”

“It is not often that one finds someone they could consider a soul mate.”

It was such a surprising confession that Sutcliffe stepped back from the counter to turn and look at Lecter. He needed to see his face to gauge the sincerity there. Only he picked just the wrong moment, ending up colliding with Hannibal as he walked back around the counter, elbow jarred and his hand slipping, sending the knife in his hand straight across his index and middle fingers.

“Shit!” he couldn’t contain the curse at the flaring pain in his hand.

“Apologies,” Hannibal said strictly as he quickly took hold of his shoulders and steered him to the sink, “I should have warned you how sharp I keep my knives.”

“I should've guessed, I suppose,” Sutcliffe said, hissing as Hannibal deftly began wrapping a tea towel across his wounded hand, “your scalpel was never dull, after all.”

“Wait here and I will fetch my kit,” Hannibal said before leaving.

Well, Sutcliffe thought as he stood, his hand pulsing in stinging agony and the smell of wonderfully cooked meat and fresh vegetables mixing with the iron tang of blood, if he was going to be cut open and then put back together in anyone’s house it might as well be Hannibal Lecter’s. His stitches had always been the most highly praised when they trained together, as had his incisions.

Brian Zeller cursed his way around the parking lot.

“I swear, if I find out who owns that fucking Volvo that keeps parking in my spot,” he said tiredly, “I’m going to put something in their engine that they’ll never forget.”

“Sugar in the gas tank?” Beverly suggested with a yawn.

“I was thinking graphite under the distributor cap,” Brian said with a shrug, “but if you’re thinking gas tank metal filings are better than sugar. Or styrene; freezes up the engine couple of miles down the road.”

“I’m not going to ask why you know all this,” she said, raising her eyebrows as they finally found an empty space.

“Misspent youth, followed by spending my adult life surrounded by chemicals and chemists. Word of advice? Never piss off a chemist.”

“Well, I’m just glad it was my carburettor which was giving mine trouble, or I’d be suspicious.”

“I didn’t do your car in,” Brian almost sing-songed, “come on, I’ll get the coffee on if you mock up the charts.”

It looked like she was the first one in. Beverly turned on the lights and set about flicking on the various switches on the walls, turning on her myriad of machines, listening as the printer booted up with a series of clunks and whines, logging in at her PC and pulling up the charts she had started the night before. She called Trace and was glad Mallory Dhvarnas was already in and answering the phone. Mallory was new and green, a tiny lab tech who looked about fifteen in her white coat, but she was bright and enthusiastic and Beverly soaked it in. She spent a couple of minutes just talking, because she needed it, and then Mallory said she’d send over the results for the fluid they’d found near the latest body.

Then, once she was done, she printed everything out and headed along to the autopsy room.

Today she imagined Will to be wearing his scruffy blue jeans, the red shirt that she’d always thought he must have had since he was a teenager to get it *that* faded, sleeves rolled up, and his thick rimmed glasses to ward off having to look anyone in the eye. She imagined that he nodded to her as she entered and she gave him a smile.

“What d’you think?” she said as she opened the third drawer and, with one strong pull, rolled out their latest find, “you would have loved this, but I think you would have hated it too. You don’t like traumatised kids, yeah? Me neither.”

The silence was telling so she filled it by snapping her fingers a couple of times, listening to the sound ring against the steel walls.

“I think whoever did it has problems with family,” she hypothesized distantly as she rolled out the next drawer, “Maybe he’s an orphan. It seems like he doesn’t get it, or maybe gets it too well. I mean who else takes mom and dad and leaves two kids asleep in the next room to find *this* in the morning?”

She imagined Will would have said something dryly analytical, maybe like *he wants to foster an independence that he never had* or *he didn’t plan well, ran out of time; happens to green killers too*

eager for their first taste. Will had never postulated on ‘someones’ or ‘perps’ or ‘this or that person’; he had worked in ‘he did’ or ‘she did’, like they were next door neighbours he was reluctantly getting to know. Beverly had tried, briefly, to change her way of thinking into that dead certainty but it didn’t take. She felt too close to them when she talked that way; it had scared her.

She put her paperwork onto the table and sat down, waiting for the others. It always felt wrong, sitting here acting as if nothing was happening. She knew life kept going and they couldn’t stop for every bump and hiccup, but the thought of Will falling to the wayside made her insides churn. It was as if the world itself was rolling on without them.

It was quiet and she stared at the wall.

“I know you’re ok,” she said, hating that she had to whisper it for fear of jinxing herself, “you are, right?”

It was in the quiet that she felt the worst. She looked down at the floor, let out and puff of breath and closed her eyes.

Phyllis Crawford had decided, on waking up that morning, that she was feeling impatient today. Impatient to get out of the shower because it bored her, impatient to see her husband come home not looking like he’d had another chunk ripped out of his waning ability to cope, impatient to have the nurses stop lecturing her on how much longer she’d have for certain if she would agree to the course of chemotherapy, impatient for things to come to a god damned finish and leave her out of this constant, endless waiting.

Most of all she was impatient to arrive at her appointment and have her weekly dose of being regarded with calm, analytical professionalism and a surprising lack of judgement.

“Good afternoon Mrs Crawford,” Dr. Lecter greeted her courteously, as always, “please come in.”

Though recently she felt the last one had been tainted somewhat. Not that she resented it, more that she felt she didn’t have the energy for it and that, in itself, made her feel like a terrible person. The last thing she needed right now was to think that being selfish was a sin. Yet, feeling sorry for Dr. Lecter even as he helped her was as difficult not to do as it was tiring.

“I’ve never been good at being truly sure of anything,” she said tightly as she sat in the chair, unable to relax, “it’s a definite concept. I don’t like definites. Or I suppose I didn’t before all this.”

“Definites tend to impose themselves on our lives,” Hannibal agreed, “rather than be something we choose.”

“I suppose I should be forgiving,” she said, taking a sharp sigh, “only I don’t know if that is a definite or not, it’s more...”

She hesitated because it was precariously close to being something she actually wanted to talk about. Phyllis had already told herself that she would keep those for herself, or maybe Jack when everything was coming to an end. Yet, when she looked up she found Dr. Lecter watching her patiently, face unassuming and calm, and the words seemed to tumble out without her giving them full permission.

“It is more like forgiveness is a profound state,” she said, “I’ve been having a lot of those recently. More unconscious than conscious. I found myself staring at a tree yesterday. Can you believe that? A tree, as if I’d never seen one before. And I was thinking, look at that, what a beautiful thing. Why have I never noticed what a beautiful thing trees are up until now? Why have I been left with such a small amount of time with which to appreciate all these beautiful things that I’m noticing for the first time?”

She laughed, low and barely there.

“Then you know what?” she asked; Hannibal shook his head lightly in response, “I realised that being profound is so very *boring*. Everything is so overdramatic and time consuming and indulgent. It takes forever and it has no point in the end. I remember the times when I used to be spiteful and angry and passionate and...and it seems so much *more*. Now I know that everyone should cherish being a petty little fool sometimes. It means you aren’t dying.”

It may have been the first time she had seen Hannibal Lecter genuinely smile, beyond simple politeness. She wondered if most things he did now had the same veneer of fake calm overlaying a tumult of emotion that was a constant in her life. Somehow she couldn’t see that for him. The man was a solid state of control at all times, relaxed and seemingly carefree but rigid and reserved.

Only she could see the tightness in his shoulders sometimes, the thinness to his lips whenever conversation steered towards love and companionship. She wished she didn’t have to feel so very sorry for him.

“Then you perhaps feel that forgiveness should be less profound?” he asked after a moment’s silence.

“I think I’ve realised that forgiveness is...” she searched for the words, “you don’t choose to do it. You can’t. It simply happens to you.”

“Has forgiveness simply happened to you?”

“I’m in between deaths at the moment,” she said with a grim smile that travelled nowhere near her eyes, “things have become a lot sharper and I think I’ll just have to wait my turn to find meaning.”

“The punctuation at the end of a sentence gives meaning to every word, every space that proceeded it.”

“They moved my punctuation mark, Dr. Lecter. They’re always moving it. And you moved my meaning.”

“I hoped to let you see your own meaning, not manipulate it.”

“I’m not here because I want to be here. I’m here because I won’t abandon Jack, not again.”

“Love and death are the great hinges on which all human sympathies turn,” Lecter said, tipping his head slightly to the left and down (lips thinning, she noticed) “what we do for ourselves dies with us. What we do for others, that lives on beyond us.”

As she left he walked her to the door, holding it open like a courtly gentleman, always out of arms reach. She walked through and tipped her head in gratitude. She was at the doorway back into the lobby before she stopped, turned and spoke before she lost the will to.

“Would you forgive him?”

Dr Lecter stopped in his tracks, turning back sharply to regard her as a startled rabbit would a fox. She thought he looked charmingly anxious for all of a couple of seconds before his mask slid back into place.

“I am sorry, who do you mean?” he asked.

“The Chesapeake Ripper,” she said, not sugar coating it, “he took something precious from you. I was just wondering how far forgiveness could stretch, if even you could give it. If maybe...anyone could ever hope to be forgiven, even by someone they hate.”

He considered it for far longer than she’d expected him to. Honestly she had thought he might politely decline an answer or even ignore the question altogether. Instead, she was given something she did not anticipate.

“I would hope that he would expect forgiveness, as any other would. Whether he receives it in return, that is perhaps up to your factor of ‘just happening’.”

“You miss him, don’t you,” she asked, “Will.”

“Every day for three months,” he said without hesitation, so much so that he seemed to surprise himself with the admission and lifted his right hand to fuss with his tie for a moment, smoothing it flat, “apologies, Mrs Crawford, but I must prepare for my next client.”

“Of course,” she said, refusing to apologise for her words; she felt they were somehow justified.

Everyone deserved to be reminded of those they loved, she thought, even if it hurt.

“You really are doing tremendously well,” Hannibal said with a small smile as he watched Alana Bloom walk the length of the room without crutches, "quite the survivor."

“I thought it was going to be worse,” she admitted, “honestly? When this started I thought I’d never be able to walk again without something there holding me up.”

“The human body’s ability to adapt and overcome has never ceased to amaze me,” he said.

“That why you moved from medicine of the body to medicine of the mind?”

“I believe the same philosophy can be applied to a wounded mind. Time and perseverance: the two great healers.”

She stopped when she reached the doorway, holding out her arm to steady herself against the handle. It took a few minutes to build up the need to say it, enough to overcome the want to never voice it.

“No news?”

“...No. There have been no developments.”

“I thought Beverly said they might have found his car.”

“False alarm.”

“Ok. Well...”

The hand on her arm allowed her to walk back to her sofa without fear of falling. It was nice, being home, even if it was difficult getting around. She made do. Like Hannibal said, time and perseverance. Only it didn’t seem to work for her mind as well as for her mending physicality.

"You don't actually have to cook me dinner," she said, smiling softly as he sat down beside her on the couch and opened the three pill bottles lined up on the coffee table, "I can just order in."

“I would not hear of it," Hannibal looked affectionately affronted, "I have something very nutritious in store. It will have you running again in no time. Now, I believe you are to take these?”

“Doctor’s orders,” she said with a wobbly smile, “could I ask you to get me some water?”

“Of course.”

It was stupid. She knew it was stupid, but the feeling had been getting stronger and stronger these past few weeks. The dreams had been getting worse, as had the nightmares. Sometimes she couldn’t tell which was worse, the nightmares where she screamed and screamed and no one came to help her, or the bog standard dreams where she walked into the lecture theatre at Quantico and Will was standing there, sorting through his notes and wearing that small frown that always wrinkled his forehead when he concentrated.

“Here you are.”

She took the glass and then swallowed the pills, one after the other. She finished the water and put it down with a clack on the glass coffee table. The sunlight was low in the sky and it cast odd shadows in the open plan of the apartment, stretching long and thin over the wooden floorboards. She wondered, briefly morose, if Will could see the same shadows she was seeing wherever he was.

Or if he couldn’t because...

“I don’t know how long I can keep this up,” she admitted to the silence.

“I know,” Hannibal said, sounding calmly resigned.

“Every day I think about where he is, what he’s thinking, what I’m thinking back,” she said, pushing her hands into the soft material of the sofa, “and every day I get nothing. There’s nothing there and I don’t know how long I can last before it eats me alive.”

“There is no answer more hated than no answer at all,” Hannibal said, looking to her.

“Don’t do that to me,” she said, her tone blatantly upset; he frowned lightly, “*don’t* sit there and hide behind your methods. I can’t have you distanced too. I need someone here, someone who knows what I mean, someone who...”

The hand on hers made her jerk backwards in memory, to the hospital where Hannibal had placed his hand on hers for comfort. A comfort. Yes, that’s what it was. That’s what she needed. Couldn’t

she have that? Just that, while she held onto her dreams and her nightmares and wished, just *wished*...

She had pulled him into the kiss before she got the chance to deliberate it. Deliberating would have only stopped her. She was scared that he would push her away but instead there were a few moments of no reaction at all, then a hand. A hand against her back, holding her steady. She was not encouraged but she wasn't rejected. When she pulled back she didn't have the energy to feel mortified.

"I'm sorry," she said softly, "I shouldn't have."

"It is alright," Hannibal said, surprising her, "we are both grieving. Closeness with another is a natural craving when suffering loss. We are both grieving for Will," he looked past her, as if seeing something that wasn't there, "We are both a little lost in his wake."

That they fell back together wasn't something she could claim as inevitability, Alana thought, but at the very least Hannibal's sure hands and warm lips kept the nightmares at bay.

By the time she pulled into her driveway Beverly Katz was in tears. She couldn't stop, she just *couldn't stop*. She wanted to, so very badly, but she couldn't.

The last time she had cried like this had been at her father's funeral. That same inability to stem the sheer emotion welling up inside and flooding out. She berated herself for it, felt thoughtless for it. And the stupidest thing, she thought angrily as she locked her car and jogged to the house, had set it off.

"Hey hun?" she heard Nigel calling from the kitchen as she clumsily locked the door, "Did you get that white wine? Just this sauce has turned into kind of a disaster area, so, yeah I think we should just drink the bastard instead of using it to..."

Hurrying down the corridor had been her plan; quickly into the bathroom, calm down, tidy up, no one would have to know. Only once she was inside and she heard Nigel's voice it only made it worse. She stood leaning against the corridor wall with her hands pressed against her mouth. When she looked up he was standing in the doorway staring at her in shock, sleeves rolled up and apron around his waist. Another two seconds passed and suddenly she was enveloped.

"Oh god, is everything alright?" he asked quickly, his hug tight, "Did they..." he started delicately, "have they found him?"

"No," she said, her voice tainted with sobs as she shook her head, "it's nothing I just, god, I just feel like shit today."

"Hey, ok, it's not *nothing*," Nigel said with a small laugh of disbelief, "you don't breakdown for nothing."

"It's stupid," she said, pulling back a little and hugging her arms around her waist, "god, I'm such an idiot, I just..."

He backed off and waited for her to talk in her own time. She appreciated it even though she wished he would just hold her again. It had felt nice, curbed the irrational fear in her. She looked back to him and wiped her eyes harshly.

“I was...” she cleared her throat, “I was driving out from work and I turned right, you know to come home? Automatic. Then I remembered you wanted wine, so I had to drive right up to the intersection and back and...” she shook her head, “you remember Will’s boyfriend, right?”

“Dr. Lecter the head chef?” Nigel said, lifting his eyebrows and letting out a sigh, “after his in depth lecture on the proper way to make dauphinoise potatoes how could I forget him?”

“He made two comments, Nigel, honestly,” Beverly shrugged off Nigel’s rebuke, hands on her hips, “anyway, look it’s just I drove back past work and I guess Alana Bloom has been coming back in to do a trial run of lectures again. She was pretty bad after the attack and it’s taken her months just to get back on her feet so...god, I’m rambling aren’t I?”

“You sure are,” he smiled.

She took a breath and felt foolish.

“I saw them kissing in the parking lot,” she said finally, shrugging even as she felt tears escaping down over her fraught smile, “and I ran a red light doing it. I just thought...” even thinking it made it seem real, “I just thought that’s it, isn’t it. Will’s gone and we’re never going to see him again. If someone you love gives up on you, you’re gone right?”

“Oh Bev,” Nigel shook his head, looking like he’d love to give her an answer that he didn’t have.

“It’s been four moths Nigel,” she said as if he were trying to argue with her, “and nothing, not even a ransom, not a body part in the mail, *nothing*.”

“I know,” he said, nodding.

“He doesn’t deserve it,” she said, wiping her nose on the back of her hand, “Will. We should have been there for him and we weren’t. Now even Hannibal’s given up on him. I can’t stand it, *this*. We just keep going on as if nothing has happened, but it has and no one wants to say it. Fucking hell, I hate this.”

Nigel seemed to understand it was time to move back in and Beverly returned the hug this time. She held him as tightly as he held her. She realised she was no longer crying but the horrible, sinking hollowness hadn’t left her.

“How long would it take you?” she asked quietly.

“What?”

“To give up on me?”

“I wouldn’t,” an instant answer as Nigel pulled back enough to look her in the eyes, “not ever. Even if they showed me a body I don’t think I could really...jees this got morbid. Put it this way,” he said, kissing her softly, “I love you, I’ll always love you and as far as I’m concerned there’s no one else for me. And if Doctor Prissy Pants wants to give up on Will then let him. Doesn’t mean you have to.”

The smile was almost involuntary but she was thankful for it regardless.

“Oh god,” she managed to laugh through her choked up throat, smothering the sound into Nigel’s shoulder, “*please* don’t ever let him hear you calling him *prissy pants*.”

“Well he is,” Nigel said, looking pleased that he’d managed to put a smile back on her face, “I mean who wears a green, blue and yellow plaid suit in this day and age?”

She laughed into his shirt and let him continue deconstructing Lecter’s fashion sense. Somehow he’d managed to find the mote of rationality she’d overlooked.

Doesn’t mean you have to. And she wouldn’t.

Half three in the morning and Donald Sutcliffe was woken by, what proceeded to sound like, something falling softly down the stairs. He blinked, patted around for the light switch, and had an odd moment where he opened his mouth to tell Barbara to stay in bed while he checked it out.

“God,” he said to himself, rubbing his face as he sat up, “get a grip.”

Two and half years since his divorce and he still found himself waking up expecting to see her face. A spike of jealousy gnawed through him as he got up and grabbed the baseball bat from his cupboard. He wondered if David, what was his second name? Brass? Brissen? He didn’t care. He wondered if he gave her as good of a life as he had or if the they were just poor schmucks together now. He always ended up wondering spiteful things when he woke up alone.

He took a deep breath and reigned in his temper, just a little, holding the bat tightly as he walked along the landing to the top of the stairs. There was nothing there. He crept down the stairs slowly, careful not to catch the ones that creaked. The living room was quiet and a little cold, the kitchen smelling slightly of onions, but he couldn’t see a lurking intruder or anything out of place.

He sighed roughly, rubbing at his face.

Like he didn’t get little enough sleep as it was, he thought as he trudged back up the stairs to bed.

It was dark and the phone was ringing. Jack Crawford jerked awake with a snort and pulled himself up against the headboard, reaching out to turn on the bedside lamp. He heard Phyllis moving beside him and quickly answered the shrill ring.

“Yes?” he asked tersely.

“Jack...” a voice said, barely audible, “Jack...”

“Who is this?”

“Jack... it’s Will.”

“Will?” Jack’s brain tried to snap him wide awake, “wh-”

“I don’t know where I am,” it was recognisable now, Will’s voice, though somewhat hoarse and soft.

“Th-think,” he ordered blearily, “Do you remember where you were taken?” do something, *do something.* He scrambled for the covers while memories of Miriam flashed through his head, “*Will*? Speak to me!”

“I can’t see anything,” Will said after another agonising moment, “I was so wrong. I was so wrong about everything. Please... Jack... I don’t want to die like...”

Beep beep beep beep beep...

Jack sat with the dead line in his hand until he realised Phyllis was pulling herself up to sit beside him, her face concerned and brow furrowed in a frown. Jack Crawford felt sick to his stomach and furious all at once. His head swam and he put the phone down heavily even as he was unable to let go of the receiver.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

He looked at her and swallowed, hoping that the sheer panic did not show on in his eyes. Reaching out to touch her face was the only grounding thing he could think to do.

“I have to go into work,” he said.

“I already told you, it was the same, almost word for word,” Beverly said, “I looked at the transcript of the conversation you had with Miriam Lass, and Will’s is almost identical. And no, before you ask, I couldn’t trace it. It didn’t even show up on your records.”

“Just like last time with Miriam,” Brian said, shaking his head.

Sombre. That was how Jimmy Price would describe the atmosphere. Grave. Their boss, always a driving force, looked like he’d rather be anywhere but where he was at that moment. In a truth which Jimmy would never voice, he thought Jack Crawford looked like he was as culpable for Will’s disappearance as the Chesapeake Ripper was.

“Let’s go over this one more time,” Jack said eventually, “maybe there’s something we missed.”

Nearly five months down the line, Jimmy Price thought as he looked around the room at the cork boards carefully covered in papers and photographs, and the similarly stacked table, he really didn’t think there could be anything they’d missed. But maybe the phone call could reverse that, he thought, the phone call that gave them all hope even as it taunted.

“I’ve been through his notes a thousand times,” Beverly said, sounding tetchy, but then Beverly always did when someone pushed for evidence that wasn’t there; she was pragmatic and thorough, more so than any of them Jimmy thought, “everything is still the same as last time we looked.”

“Most things he left us aren’t very helpful, I guess Will kept what he thought in his head and didn’t write them down,” Brian said, lifting up a printed sheet of paper and scratching his jaw “only thing we have is this. He hadn’t changed his profile on the Ripper other than a few scribbled notes.”

“Tell me,” Jack said, rubbing tired eyes.

“You already know them,” Brian said without thinking.

“Then let me know them *again*,” Jack said loudly.

Brian nodded, refusing to argue, and focused on the paper in his hands.

“In the margin beside ‘he thought of himself as an esthete, a superior being to those lowly creatures whom he slaughtered’ he’s written...” he cleared his throat, raised his eyebrows once, sharply, and tipped his head in resignation, “he’s written ‘because he is’ in black biro.”

Well, certainly sounded like something a madman would write. Not that Jimmy hadn’t always suspected that Will was more than a little unhinged, just that they generally never really saw it on paper. It was the sort of note, Jimmy thought as images of Gideon shifted through his head, that someone able to nearly kill a man with his bare hands would make. But then Jimmy had always liked Will; he was fiercely intelligent, loyal and didn’t hesitate to speak his mind, no matter how it sounded when it came out his mouth. Jimmy felt his diverse feelings were difficult to reconcile.

“How bad was Will’s fever exactly?” Jimmy asked, looking to Jack.

“...Pretty bad,” the man sighed, looking away, “think it peaked at one hundred and eight.”

“Jesus,” Beverly shook her head, “he was lucky to be standing. He must have been out of his mind with something like that in his system.”

“Well,” Brian continued, “the other notes are just as, umm, controversial. The last one is the only one which makes it sound like he was maybe making progress. All it says is ‘Bressinden, hyphen, Personal, full stop, Empathy, question mark’.”

“Will found something out about Bressinden’s murder, we’ve already got that,” Beverly said, picking at her lip with thumb and forefinger, “but what? He sent me a text that night, said he was looking into something from home. But he also said,” she leafed through a couple of papers on the large desk between them before finding what she needed, “he said ‘I keep thinking about the things we’re already missing’ then ‘why was Bressinden so personal, why leave a note’. There’s something in there, something about the page left in Bressinden’s mouth.”

“The *Iliad*,” Jimmy said, tapping a few keys on his laptop to bring up an enlarged photograph of the torn page on the projector, “attributed to Homer. Full of blood and gore, I guess that makes it relevant on some level.”

Jimmy heard the door open but was too busy talking to turn and look.

“And liars,” Jack said, staring at the blood stained lettering, “why do you think the Ripper chose this particular page? And why tear it in half?”

“Perhaps it is what is different,” came a familiar voice from over his right shoulder; Jimmy looked up to find Hannibal Lecter standing there, oddly subdued in a grey glen check suit and matching tie over his white shirt, looking up at the projector screen, “and not the same, that we are supposed to see. I am sorry I am late, I was detained unexpectedly.”

“Nothing major I hope?” Jack asked.

“Domestic issues,” he said, smiling politely, “nothing to worry over. I...” Jimmy looked up when Lecter hesitated; he didn’t think he’d ever heard the man do so before, “you told me you had a phone call.”

“It was Will,” Jack said defiantly, as if expecting to be questioned, “I’m certain.”

Lecter watched Jack for a few seconds before breaking eye contact and looking down at the table before him. Not that Jimmy would ever dream of saying it to the man in person, but he thought Lecter looked reasonably lost at the news. He watched as the man leaned down against the table with both hands, weariness evident across his slumped shoulders.

“Then he is alive,” was all Hannibal said, closing his eyes.

“I’d stake my own life on it,” Jack said.

“The phone call was just like Miriam’s,” Beverly said; Jimmy wondered why she was giving Lecter the cold eyes but didn’t speak up, “nearly word for word. We think Will was being made to recite it.”

“Will always told me that Miriam was different, just like he insisted Bressinden was too,” Jack stated, “he said that the reason we never saw a body was because the Ripper had no reason to humiliate her, just to get rid of her. Said he might even have respected her.”

“She found him,” Hannibal said, “not many can claim that.”

“You think he’d do the same for Will?” Brian asked, his brow held low, “I mean Will was hunting him, actively hunting him. Will said the Ripper thought it was a joke we were even attempting to catch him. Wouldn’t he find Will funny then, the same as everyone else?”

“I don’t think so,” Beverly said, frowning as she picked up a picture of Bressinden; Jimmy noticed that Hannibal was watching her intently.

“What is it Bev?” Jimmy asked.

“I just...” she shook her head, rubbing at her right eye, “Will thought the Copycat was showing off for the Ripper until he realised they were one and the same. Then he said the same thing in the car remember? He thought the Ripper was just ‘showing off’. What if...what if the Ripper was showing off for Will?”

“Why pick out Will?” Jack asked, although he sounded interested, “Why not all of us?”

“Because not all of us had a relation to David Bressinden,” Beverly said, “and Will seemed to think there was something different about that kill. Maybe the Ripper wanted to, I don’t know, give him a gift? *Impress* him?”

“Well it seems kind of pointless,” Brian said, “I mean how would he even know if Will was impressed or not?”

“I don’t know,” Beverly admitted, “but it’s something.”

A natural break in conversation. Jimmy swallowed down the need to chip in and looked at the disarray of papers on the table, trying desperately, he thought, to lead them somewhere useful if only they could see it.

“Jack,” Jimmy heard Hannibal walk around behind him as the tall man approached Crawford, “may I speak to you for a moment?”

“Yeah, of course,” Jack nodded before walking with Lecter outside, the doors closing behind them.

“I don’t understand why I’m even here, to be perfectly honest with you agent Crawford.”

Jack had already decided he didn’t like Donald Sutcliffe. The man was all smiles and pleasantries, but there was an underlying frustration and coldness there that didn’t sit well with Jack. What was it Will’s addendum to his profile had said? *A convincing monster who smiled and laughed before gutting you unawares*. Yeah, Jack thought as he watched Sutcliffe under the hot lights, he could see that.

“You’re here because it has come to our attention that you have links to an ongoing investigation,” Jack said, “into the disappearance of a William Graham. I believe you treated him, about six or seven months ago?”

“Treated might be a little presumptuous,” Sutcliffe said, holding up a hand, “he was referred to me by a colleague who thought he might have been suffering from neurological issues. I did a scan, ran some blood tests, even had a follow up appointment but he never kept it. I didn’t find anything and I never saw him again after that.”

“And that colleague was?”

“Just a colleague,” Sutcliffe said.

“Answer the question, Mr. Sutcliffe,” Jack said, sitting back in his chair and regarding him coldly.

“His name’s Hannibal Lecter,” Sutcliffe said, trying to make it sound light but the name came out heavy, “I guess you know him.”

“Sure do,” Jack said, not looking as surprised as Sutcliffe would have liked he was sure, “so you wouldn’t have had contact with Will Graham through Dr Lecter?”

“None *whatsoever*. I’ve been to Hannibal’s maybe twice for dinner since he contacted me, and not once did I see, speak to or even hear of Will Graham. I don’t think you could really call me part of your investigation if this is all you’ve got, agent Crawford.”

“Well, in fact, that’s not exactly all,” Jack said with faux hesitation, leaning forwards to clasp his hands and regard Sutcliffe, “you see Dr Lecter came to see me yesterday. Told me something interesting about your wife, Barbara?”

“What the hell does..?” Sutcliffe bit out, sitting up straight, face furrowing.

“Said that you were telling him about an affair she had with a man named David Bressinden,” Jack said.

“I’m sorry,” Sutcliffe said angrily, “do you mind telling me what the damn my private life has to do with Will Graham?”

“As I said, it’s part of an ongoing investigation,” Jack shrugged, looking unconcerned, “although I am sure you heard about it, right?”

“About what?” Sutcliffe all but shouted.

“David Bressinden’s rather unfortunate end,” Jack said significantly, “No? It was all over the news.You trained as a surgeon before moving into neurology, isn't that right? I heard you were pretty good too.

"You see, Will’s case isn’t as simple as a missing persons. We’re also on the lookout for a bigger fish. You work near the George Peabody library, don’t you Donald?”

A telling silence in which Sutcliffe sat in his chair, staring, before he backed down into it and put his fingers to his lips, rubbing the flesh. He looked up at the agent standing impassively by the door before turning back to Jack.

“I want to call my lawyer.”

“Last time I fucking do anyone a god damned *favour*.”

He’d been stupid, stupid and greedy. It was always a failing, it wasn’t like he didn’t know it, just that he had difficulty dealing with it. And Hannibal Lecter had exploited that fact, just like the man did best.

Donald remembered him, oh he remembered him, because he'd envied him then just as much as he still did now. Hannibal the top of the class master of anything you put in front of him. Cold and ruthless and yet adored by anyone who crossed his path. A blessed and gifted individual, the kind you wished everyone hated just as much as you did yourself. It was spiteful to watch him rise up, always being two steps behind. Watch him sweep the Novartis Research Award, *his award*, with that fucking paper on the bio-mechanical properties of tissue-engineered grafts implanted into the arterial circulation.

“You piece of shit,” Sutcliffe said as he put his foot down on the gas and overcompensated as the wind buffeted the car, “why do you even *remember* that? Couldn’t stop watching him succeed could you? Now he’s here fucking you over!”

Well the lawyer would see about that. He was out under suspicion because they had nothing to hold him on except a hunch (yeah, sure, he thought, a hunch brought on by Lecter he was sure). Once he got home and sorted his head he was going to make an appointment with his lawyer at his office and sort all of this madness out.

Best case scenario they suspended his licence and he could move to another practice discreetly. Worst case scenario he lost his job and the stigma followed him like a bad smell.

“Ah fuck,” he said, feeling his face fall and wanting nothing more than to beat something until his hands bled, “*fuck*! Fuck, fuck, fu-!”

If he’d had both hands on the wheel, he thought, he might have been able to pull out of the way faster. As it was, he barely swerved the oncoming car. His heart raced as he spun the wheel and

slammed the brakes, listening to the squeal of tyres and the shattering sound of something heavy and metal rolling down a hill. Crash, crash, *crash*, hiss.

Donald Sutcliffe sat, shaking and panting clumsily as the wind raged outside, his hands tight around the wheel of his car. He peered up into his rear view mirror, only just able to see the underside of the trees lit up by white steam and red brake lights.

“Jesus,” he said, his voice shaking, “oh god. *Shit*.”

He stumbled as he left the car and had trouble closing it against the stormy gale, hurrying over to the bank. It was steep, leading down into a thick mess of trees, with the truck ploughed deep into the trunk of one, splintered and buckled. The bonnet hissed out steam and the cabin was still.

“Anyone...” Sutcliffe shouted over the wind, realising his voice was wavering and clearing his throat, “anyone ok down there!?”

A creak at the car door. He sighed in relief, closing his eyes, then started scrambling down the bank. It was difficult, steep and not much purchase, but he made it, tumbling a little as he reached the bottom just as the door opened. A man fell out onto the dark grass, thick black coat and black fleece hat. The wind was blessedly stemmed down by the forest.

“Hey, I didn’t see you coming,” Sutcliffe said as the man wavered to his feet, recovering quickly, “you crazy bastard, you were going the wrong way! You nearly hit me! Are you...are you alrig-?”

He wasn’t allowed to finish. The man sprang like a poised cat, grabbing his left shoulder in powerful, gloved hands and wrenching. Sutcliffe called out in alarm, trying to back up, but he tripped on the roots of the trees and the slippery leaves. The man was on him, dropping his knees to either side of Sutcliffe’s thighs. Donald tried to scramble backwards but found his hands grabbed and held while a soft, powerful smelling cloth was clamped over his mouth and nose. He struggled wildly, letting out incoherent, muffled yells as he tried to shout, tried to call out...

It was as he hauled in his first lungful of chloroform that he caught sight of the man’s face, blinking red, black, red, black in the stuttering light from the tailgate.

Hannibal Lecter looked as if he were regarding the punchline to a particularly funny joke.

Miriam Lass found it difficult to walk what with the ringing in her ears and the woozy shake in her head. She stumbled against the car door, the knife in her right hand grasped tightly, and listened to the hissing sound of steam escaping into the cold night air. Scrambling up the bank was even harder. She couldn’t let go of the knife, she thought over and over, don’t let go of it, don’t let go of it.

She looked back to the car behind her, ploughed into the tree, the bonnet furrowed like a discarded candy bar wrapper. The man behind the wheel wasn’t moving. She wanted to take her eyes off of his leaning form but she couldn’t.

At the top of the verge she found the road. She wobbled dangerously on the edge, nearly tipping back towards the slope, but found her balance and walked out onto the dark asphalt.

The sound of screeching tyres didn’t reach her until she turned to find twin bright lights illuminating the darkness. She looked up, shaking, wide eyed and numb, as a woman stepped out of her car and held a hand to her mouth.

“Oh my god,” the woman breathed, “are you *ok?*”

Miriam dropped the knife and fell to her knees.

“She’s alright?”

“Yes Jack, she’s ok, just a bit shaken up.”

The ground and the walls were alight with dancing red and blue lights, and sirens as further back up arrived. It was windy, blowing a gale more than they needed, and they huddled around the SUV as Jack Crawford stood amongst them looking like a bull ready to break the door down.

“But she can’t tell us where Will is?”

“She doesn’t know,” Brian added, grabbing at his hat at the wind picked up, “She can’t remember much.”

“Does she remember stabbing Sutcliffe to death?” Jimmy asked,

“Yeah, yeah she remembers that,” Beverly said, “not that she seems too rough about it.”

“Can’t blame her,” Jimmy added.

“Look, what we need now is *focus* people!” Jack shouted over the gusts of the storm “We’re searching his house as we speak but so far, nothing useful other than the hell he has in his basement."

"What, he got some sort of torture dungeon down there or something?" Jimmy sounded like he was trying to joke to lighten the mood.

"Don't joke about it Jimmy," Jack said darkly, "you'll see the photos soon enough. Anything from Sutcliffe?”

“Just what he had on him,” Jimmy said, looking abashed, “wallet, phone, keys.”

“Brian, you take the phone, see if he made any calls, see if he has *anything* in there that can give us a clue,” Jack said quickly and Brian nodded, rushing off, “Beverly I want you through his finances like a house on fire, you got me? Timeshares, rented property, storage lockers; he has it? I want to know about it.”

“I’m on it,” she said, nodding determinedly as she pulled on her hat, keeping her hair from flailing wildly.

“Jimmy take the wrecked tow truck and Sutcliffe’s car, it’s in his garage.”

“Right away!” Jimmy turned and hurried to the nearest tech to begin having the vehicles hauled to the lab.

An hour and a half later Jack got a call from Beverly Katz that made him pump his fist in the air, regardless of the looks he was getting from the agents around him.

“He has a cabin up near Midland Park, I’m sending you the details,” she said as Jack rushed for the parking lot, “looks like he must have paid in cash but the security deposit had to go through a transfer. It came from Sutcliffe’s account. I called the owner but I can’t get a reply.”

“You know where it is?”

“Heck yes I do because I’m sitting outside it right now.”

“Wait for me, *do not* go in there alone.”

“I’ll be here.”

By the time Jack arrived, a cavalry at his heels, Beverly Katz was standing by the front door of what appeared to be a pleasant cabin in the woods, hiding on the porch from the downpour of rain which had started half an hour ago.

“It’s locked!” she called as Jack, agent Conrad and agent Benning rushed to her side while the others set up a perimeter.

“Conrad, get it open!” Jack shouted.

The stillness of the cabin was belied by the belting of metal against wood followed by rushing feet and thundering rain. It seemed too homely inside, too cosy and nurturing. Jack, weapon drawn, hurried through the living room with its sofas and its fresh flowers, out into a short hallway with his team at his heels. He looked back and signaled the other two to one room, and Beverly to join him. They sidled out purposefully, each taking up position.

Jack counted down with his fingers; three, two, one, *crack* as wood splintered and they rushed in. Jack darted into the dark room with Beverly behind him, weapons up. A small bedroom greeted them, cold and unlit and empty.

“Shit,” he heard Beverly curse.

“Agent Crawford!” an urgent cry from the next room stopped his heart from plummeting.

The other room was not dark, instead barely lit and filled with a smell that clashed with the comfortable and domestic setting; it smelled of hospital.

“I knew it,” Beverly said with a guttural joy in her voice as she stood beside him, staring into the room where agent Conrad and agent Benning looked back, holstering their weapons, “I *knew* it.”

Despite the pallor of his skin, his closed eyes, the slightly sunken state of his face, the wires slinking up against his skin like leeches and the plethora of machinery he was hooked to, if the EKG machine by the bed was to be believed then Will Graham was alive.

Jack Crawford holstered his gun and, without warning, let out a whooping yell of triumph.

Cruel Pour Être Gentil

Chapter Notes

> Happy Halloween Fannibals! I think this might be a suitably Gothic chapter in keeping with the season. Let the games begin...
>
> Also if you would like a reference for the 'Scale of Evil' (as it is featured and referenced heavily in this chapter) here is a link : http://scaleofevil.blogspot.co.uk/
>
> Title Translation: "Cruel Pour Être Gentil" - 'Cruel to be Kind'

Wings fluttering. Soft against his face.

The sound of an animal nearby. He could hear it.

Open your eyes.

He tried: Heavy, leaden, immovable. Could he remember the last time he had opened them?

The wings moved and there was snort; hot breath, the smell of spicy fur. Smoke.

Eyes on him. He felt watched.

He thought he could hear water running, sounding like the murmur of many voices.

Sinking. Slowly sinking. Gone.

“Do you remember how it felt to kill?”

“Yes,” he replied, “it sizzled and it raced. My heart in my throat, demanding to get out. Demanding to remind me how it tasted.”

A moon in the sky. Dark trees. His feet sank into the snow and he stared upwards, grinning.

“Do you remember how it tasted?”

“Bitter. Tangy.”

Running paws, *crunch crunch*, running breaths, *huff huff*. Their prey was loose. Breaking free of the stifling hold on his legs he jumped forwards across the landscape, rushing past in a blur of bark and bare branches.

“Like blood?”

“Like regret.”

All around him they panted. His heart raced and he heard the braying at his side. Antlers of polished ivory delivered a sight of feverish delight. *Their heads shall be crowned with laurel in oblivion*. Panting, milky breath vomited out through clenched, het-up teeth and gums. The pack ran black blood in the darkness where it could not be seen. A grin stared back as he glanced to the trees as they passed, a smudge of charcoal grey; teeth missing, blood pouring, fists aching. The smile remained.

“No place for regret in the head of vengeance?”

“Vengeance is just, yet justice is not vengeful. Don’t reconcile me.”

Climbing now, climbing high on the slopes where idiots lay and festered, squalling upon the crags and cliffs. They grabbed at him as he rushed, between lolling tongues and roughs pads of paws, between proud racks of antler born fiends and the devastation of hooves. Their prey was close, so close he could smell the tang of sweat.

No place for things you love in the bone arena

There, laying on the bare rock. He snarled, dropped to all fours and leapt. Hands around a bicep, another in soft hair. It all came away so easily and dispassionate eyes watched him. An approving smile graced bound lips as Will bared the man’s neck and sank in his teeth until warm, arterial blood filled his mouth. All around him the animals pawed and clopped.

The summit reached, the moon laid bare in a sky which seemed more a roof to a cage than a bright freedom. He bent back his red stained neck in offering and howled.

The dogs howled with him.

The stag brayed in the night.

There was a bird calling in the trees. He felt groggy, like the first light of morning before eyes are opened. Will wanted to open his eyes and find it, something to focus his irritation. It wouldn’t stop, *cheap cheap cheap cheap*, over and over again, regular as an alarm.

Tired, he was so tired. He hoped it would fly away soon.

Sunlight on his face, he could feel the warmth, see the faint glow of red through his eyelids.

A murmur of water. He tried to wriggle himself comfortable on the warm fur he was lying against. A shadow of antlers across sunlit flesh.

Something touched his face.

He took a deep breath and slipped back down.

The bones popped out of joint. Hobbs' face grinned at him, milky eyed horror, and his limbs moved across the velvet darkness like worms ravaging a corpse. All swerving and undulating until the man's mouth yawned open and a feast of hands crawled up, out, followed by wrists, arms, shoulders, faces.

The young girl march began to the sound of no fanfare. Will sat in his chair and watched, his hands tied together, palms pressed flat.

He ate us. We are never to return.

A memory of a painting focused his mind: Goya, *Saturn devouring one of his sons*. A misshapen, haunted stare and a gaping mouth with no regret. The first child crawled from its tomb behind rotting teeth and stood before Will, all dripping blood and vitriol.

She baited us. He honoured us. Where is our justice while you play at happiness?

He wished he could hang his head. Her eyes were fierce and he could not face them. Another joined her, hauling out of the womb-mouth until Hobbs had no face left to bear fruit.

Your love is your crime. You let yourself fall even as you knew the truth.

No chance of a reply. His mouth was sealed shut. He closed his eyes in shame and wished he could understand. His eyes snapped open, down to his hands to see them wrapped at the wrists with rough rope. They opened like the pages of a book; blood dropped from above like rain. Snap! Palms closed. The warmth oozed between fingers. Open again to a Rorschach of pain and garrotted hopes.

A girl's face stared out in profile, mirrored, a hook through her mouth and the line pulling.

Did you know the cuckoo calls at the last hour? It mocks.

Will looked up to find Abigail before him, her forehead streaming blood from her hairline; running down her face as spikes, antlers growing, blossoming, shedding. He couldn't bear it.

He will not miss you when you are gone. Perhaps his greatest sin. You could be dead tomorrow; another amusement frittered away.

The chair felt as a mercy seat. He waited for his judgement though he could barely understand his crime.

You mean nothing to him. None of us do.

A rare fit of consciousness surged; stronger than the rest. Not a dream, not a nightmare, not the limbo in between. Will grabbed it before it could escape.

"Wh-what..?" his mouth managed to mumble.

Cold, it was cold. He couldn't feel the blindfold against his face yet he couldn't open his eyes. There was an incessant, low beep keeping regular with his heart. *How long have I been out?* Moving seemed to be out of the question other than the vague slurring of his lips.

The chemical smell of antiseptic sat like a cloying layer. Even if he had wanted to try and grab the arms which lifted and rolled him onto his side he was incapable. Misty limbed and reluctant eyed. Everything lay like a dropped dummy in a store window, manipulated into any shape necessary by unseen hands.

“Don’t...” he managed, mainly lost to a huff of breath, “let me...”

As a contrast to the building dread that came with his awakening, a soft touch was placed against the back of his neck. The fingers rubbed gently, soft cloth beneath them. Will felt his breath speed up. Move, move, *move*, he urged his groggy limbs. Deadened nerve endings did not reply other than to inform him exactly where fingertips stroked over his collarbone.

Don’t touch me. His fingers shook against the soft material on which they lay. *Don’t fucking touch me.*

There was a soft sound of plastic being scrunched between fingers; the sound of metal against metal. Something tugged against his flesh, mollusc-like.

“Please-*ah...*”

A rushing feeling, and a pain in his forearm. Words already half formed ran from his lips like rain down window glass, congealing upon the sill. Everything faded back to the inside of his own head.

A metal slab in a clear void. There was a body there, beneath the white sheet draped over, he knew there was. Had seen enough to know when a corpse was in the room with him. The silhouettes phased in one by one, dark all around him against the stark, white backdrop. Outlines he recognised.

“Tell us what you see, Will.”

Jack, broad and intimidating, stood to his right, hands on his hips.

Will reached out and pulled back the cloth. Lawrence Wells lay there, face calm, serene, even as Will pulled further and further to reveal his dismembered stumps.

The totem rose silently from the ground behind him and spread its arms. The lake emerged as if from the mist, a silent morning full of ice flows and snow drifts. Eyes on him. *You are watched.* From behind the pillar the stag-man peered, his vital claws shiny against carapace torsos.

“Tell us what you think, Will.”

Beverly appeared to his left, a hand on his shoulder. Another white sheet pulled, this time revealing a hole which peered down onto a dinner scene, the players in their places. Beverly passed the salt and Will took it with a nod of thanks. Hannibal had commented on the food, *Will had known he would*, and Will caught Beverly’s stare as her fiancé replied stiffly. They shared a smile because it was *long suffering affection wasn’t it? To know what someone would do before they did it?* And when he passed the salt to Hannibal the man purposefully brushed his fingers with delicate fingertips. He did not appreciate public shows of affection, for which Will was glad (he didn’t like

them either), which made the contact all the more precious. A warm stare between them. Will felt his lips quirk.

The stag-man sat in the corner, watching, observing, his face impassive.

“Tell us what you feel, Will.”

Zeller’s black, silhouette hand pulled away the next without waiting for an order. Will felt his chest seize up and tried to back away. The ebony skin of the human stag glistened as it rutted into the body beneath it. Will saw himself on his knees, bent at the hips with his chest and arms splayed across the polished metal, eyes screwed shut and mouth open as he gasped in elation with every violent thrust. The stag turned its white stare to him as it lay down across his naked doppelganger, like an unfiltered incubus, a living nightmare of ravishment.

“I think he likes you, Will,” Price’s shadow said with humour, standing before the slab and marking something down on a clipboard.

A braying clop. Will turned away, putting his back to the nightmare even as the very act made his skin crawl. Behind him he found the stag, feathers ruffled in an unseen wind. It bobbed its proud head and pawed at the floor, pulling up runnels of dirt on the white ground. Will rushed for it, throwing himself against its side, burying his hands in the fur and his face in the ruff around its neck.

You are watched.

He could feel the eyes of the stag-man on his back. Things began to crumble. Footsteps, soft but clear, gaining on him, closer, closer. The great, round, glassy eye of the stag looked at him as it turned its head. Will shook, dropping to his knees as the stag lowered itself to the ground.

No, he wanted to plead, please *don’t*.

Inside, its gaze told him. The footsteps grew closer. Inside.

A curved hunting knife in his hand and the stag rolled onto its side, soft fur exposed, mud strewn hooves inert against the pale ground.

Inside, inside, inside.

Oh god.

Inside, inside, inside!

Oh god.

The spray of ruptured viscera as Will opened his mouth and rammed the knife into the stag’s belly was fulfilling. He felt his lips shaking open further, accepting the blood as a libation while he pulled and pulled and opened the stag to the air, steaming and screaming.

Closer, closer, *closer*. A hand, long claws black as pitch, crawled over his shoulder. A terrific pulse of fear. *Escape!* Will pushed himself forwards and rammed his hands into the cut, harder and harder, pulling apart flesh and bloody membrane. *Inside* he crawled, *inside* he hid, *inside* he could feel the pulsing heartbeat and the rusty feelings of those he had tried to delve within. *Tell us what you think, Will*.

A perfect peace. His nose filled with the iron tang. It was dark, black, serene. Encased as in an abyssal womb, thrumming with energy and life. *Inside.*

Then a sudden disturbance crept inside, a new feeling. He should have stiffened, should have cried out, should have felt the same fear as before. Only now, as the stag man slid out of the darkness behind him, joining him in the tight space, and his arms slipped around Will's chest and his teeth sank into his neck, everything seemed to click into place.

Everything seemed so very *right*.

Whistling. Was it whistling? Something high pitched, like a kettle boiling over. He was overly aware of the breath being pulled into his lungs, exhaled out in a rush, in, out.

His mouth felt thick, tongue heavy. When he blinked open his eyes it was a shift from black pitch to pitch black. That he'd managed to open them at all was not lost on him just, at that moment, it didn't seem important. Not much did.

He felt hot. His back pressed against something solid but warm. He moulded to it, his head fitted against bone and skin. A sound of soft breathing above, to his right. Rhythmic, soothing.

Something hard and cold was pressed from his cheek up to his ear. He tried to turn away from it, frowning, but a gentle palm against his cheek kept his head steady. He felt dizzy as an elongated ringing startled out from the chill.

Third time it stopped, replaced by a drowsy, irritated voice.

"Yes?"

"*Jack*," the voice at his ear whispered; the whispering lips, the whispering lips were holding him.

"Jack..." he repeated on instinct, his mouth clumsy, "Jack..."

"Who is this?" a concerned tone.

"*Jack it's Will*" they whispered; not the gentleman's drawl he'd expected.

"Jack...it's Will," he followed.

"Will? Wh-" definite panic.

"*I don't know where I am*."

"I don't know where I am," he cut the voice off, the palm at his face moving until fingers stroked over his cheek, tender.

"Th-think! Do you remember where..?" the voice at his other ear was severe; Will frowned as it continued, losing the ability to comprehend the stream of demands. It was irritating. He wanted it gone. The fingers at his face were soothing, he leaned into them.

"*I can't see anything.*"

“I can’t see anything,” he couldn’t, he thought, he couldn’t see a damn thing.

“*I was wrong. I was so wrong about everything*.”

“I was wrong. I was so wrong about everything,” what was he wrong about? Why did he have to say it?

“*Please, Jack*”

“Please...Jack”

“*I don’t want to die like this”*

“I don’t want to die like...”

A sudden fit of beeps sprang to life, enough to rival the constant, steady procession in the background.

“...this,” he finished, escaping like a sigh, “where..?”

“*Shhh,*” the fingers at his cheek were removed, replaced by dry pressure and hot breath. A kiss, soft and fleeting, “*you did so well.*”

Something moved through his hair. He managed to roll his head, feeling himself slot into what felt like the crook between a neck and shoulder. There was a spicy smell there; spicy wood, a hint of smoke. He breathed it in as he descended.

Back down into the abyss.

A vital ecstasy. It slipped in and took root. There was something moving inside of him. He pushed his hands against the ground for purchase and they sank. He threw his head back and let out a cry as the hard heat inside of him pulsed. He wanted it.

Blind hedonist. He didn’t care.

“I have a weakness for beautiful things.”

The voice at his ear had him whimpering. On all fours on the sinking, wet floor while he was violated. The intimacy was rare, something he did not allow. So seldom given, so costly.

Please. Such a fool; you ask for your own humiliation. *I need it*.

The sinking reached his elbows. The sucking substance rippled as he breathed out, stuttering against it as his body rocked in time with every squirming thrust. Powerful hands slipped around his waist.

“To know my own feelings are returned. You give yourself to me.”

I have to. Did you even ask? You let him have you while everyone else is kept at arm’s reach. You gave yourself up for judgement but the jury is lost. *I love him.*

His chin dipped into the running pool. *Sinking, sink, sank.*

“Dear Will. Dear Will.”

He was ground down into the running, dark waters, his mouth open in keening ecstasy.

Find me, find me, find me.

Dear Hannibal.

Do you remember me now?

When Will finally opened his eyes to more than just all encompassing darkness, he almost didn’t realise the significance of the act. He blinked lazily against the pale, artificial light in his eyes. When he realised he was staring at a ceiling he frowned, his forehead barely wrinkling.

Look left, eyes straining to reach the corner of his vision: a dark window set into a white wall.

Look right, managing to barely roll his head: a chair and a man looking down at a book in his hands.

He tried to open his mouth but his lips felt stuck together. It took far more effort than he had expected to push his tongue up and out, separating the dry, glue-like substance holding his mouth shut. He licked his lips and took a breath. When he looked back to Hannibal the man was watching him with a small, genuine smile upon his face and warmth in his eyes.

A lie? His brain asked wearily. Just another lie. I’m dreaming about you.

It seemed to take forever to lift his right hand, propping it against the rail along the side of the bed. A mocking sensation of cold metal against his wrist (it’s not real, Will, don’t let it fool you). Hannibal watched him for a few seconds before he appeared to grasp Will’s intention (don’t get your hopes up), reaching out to wrap long fingers (oh god) around his shaking hand (*oh god he’s real*).

Will closed his eyes tightly, unable to stop the croaking sound in his throat. The fingers tightened as he opened them again, watching as lips were pressed against his fingertips.

“Nor-“ Will cleared his throat, hating the dry, irritated feeling stuck inside his mouth; he moved his tongue around, trying to gather some saliva to swallow, “normally I...wake up a-about now.”

“So do I,” Hannibal smiled, leaning against the rail on his elbows, Will’s hand clasped firmly between his own; then the man turned his face and pressed his cheek into the palm, breathing deeply. Will’s finger’s twitched and his chest contracted.

Were there tears against his face? Will blinked, the pooling liquid trickling down to scurry into his hair.

Oh god.

Oh god it’s *real*.

He closed his eyes and was unable to stop himself drifting.

When he awoke there was a young woman with red hair standing with a male nurse in green scrubs, talking softly by his bedside. Will swallowed and then opened his mouth.

“Hey,” he said, causing two pairs of eyes to jump to him, “where’s...doctor Lecter?”

“Ah, my names Mellissa Haggerty, Will, your consultant,” the redhead said with a smile, “your doctor will be here soon. His name is Colin Gregor.”

“No,” Will shook his head as far as it would go, “he was here a minute ago, *right here*, I need to speak to him...”

“No one’s been in here, Mr. Graham,” the nurse said, “I’ve been working at my station just across the way and visiting hours are over. You must have been having a dream. Coming off the sedation can play tricks on your mind.”

“He...was *here*,” Will insisted tightly, trying to sit up, “I felt it...my hand.”

“Please try not to move Mr Graham...” hands on his shoulders.

“Let me go,” he growled, baring his teeth, “don’t *fucking touch me!*”

“Get the doctor,” the nurse told the redhead sternly as Will struggled against his iron grip, “we need the doctor in here now!”

“Hannibal!” Will heard his voice break as he tried to claw his way from the bed and the consultant rushed from the room, “*Hannibal!*”

It would take a while. That was what Will Graham told himself as he lay, half curled on his side, left arm stretched out flat for the IV canula. It would take a while.

The first three days he didn’t touch his food because it sickened him. His stomach rejected it as much as his mind did. He didn’t speak because it seemed a waste. The words that made to leave his mouth were harsh and unpleasant. Violent. Too close to home.

He refused visitors and the nurses didn’t seem to think that was a bad thing. Will wondered how far their understanding would stretch considering what he’d been through. Considering what he was capable of.

He remembered Gideon a lot in those alone-days. Sometimes he wanted to ask what had happened to him. Sometimes he wanted to ask the date, just to hear it again and cement in his mind just how long he’d been absent from the world. Sometimes he wanted to go home. Mainly he wanted to stay there, exactly where he was, and not ever move again.

On the third day he was able to lift himself with his arms and push himself up the bed with his legs under the covers. The physiotherapist visited. Some uptight woman with rimless glasses; a pretentious socialite, Will thought, and probably easy to offend.

“Honestly?” she said, sighing as Will avoided her eyes, “I’ve never seen someone in as good a shape as you after such a prolonged coma. Your muscle atrophy is minimal, joints haven’t suffered, no bed sores. I think you’ll find recovery a breeze Mr Graham. Someone must have been taking very good care of you.”

Obviously no one had told her, Will thought. He couldn’t stop the words leaving his mouth.

“Oh yeah,” he smiled down at the bedcovers, “must have been in his spare time between drugging me senseless and disembowelling people. Chesapeake Ripper keeps a busy schedule, you understand.”

She hadn’t been the same with him since. Not that he cared. The week he spent stonewalling everyone who turned up at his door was immensely satisfying. Will retained his bubble for as long as it would last.

Yet still...he listened for every name announced by the nurses through a half opened door; *Jack; Beverly, Brian and Jimmy; Alana;* even *Reggie* from the evidence room and a couple of his more eager students, *Heather and Graeme*. No Hannibal.

The want to see him almost outweighed the need to stay as far from his life as possible. The need to see the man in the physical that his dreams had almost convinced him only existed in the incorporeal.

Did I dream you? he sometimes wondered after he woke to the nurse walking into the room backwards, hauling the drug cart with her. Were you ever real? He told himself that it was. It was all real. For some reason that was difficult news to swallow.

He had dreams that turned into nightmares, nightmares that turned into dreams. His subconscious told him he was able to walk and he found himself stalking the corridors of the hospital, scalpel in hand; Elaine Barber the physio ended that particular jaunt into the dark places displayed upon the reception desk, split groin to gullet, her severed hands pinned to her skull, covering her ears. *No listening, no touch. No place for you in my world.* He had left her glasses on because it amused him. Will hadn’t woken up with a gasp of disgust in his throat as he normally would. Instead his eyes slid open and he pulled in a tight breath through his nose.

As if to smell the tang there.

Then, as he lay breathing steadily, he began to wonder how far his own understanding of himself would stretch.

“So I hear you’ve been making a nuisance of yourself already.”

Will looked up from leafing through photographs of decapitated corpses to find Jack Crawford in his doorway. A week and a half into his hospital stint and he’d given up on self imposed isolation for fear he’d fall back into the abyss he’d only just managed to crawl out of, or so he hoped. Beverly had beaten Jack to the punch by one day. It had been difficult to refuse her after her third try.

Will licked his lips, looked down to the mess of files scattered over his bed, boxes by his bedside cabinet, and shrugged as Jack closed the door, shaking his head.

“What can I say, you’ve been busy while I was gone,” Will said, putting down the photographs onto the cabinet and trying his best to shuffle everything into some sort of order.

“Oh, I *can’t imagine* why the nurses don’t like you,” Jack said with a restrained laugh, picking up an enlarged photograph of a neck wound from the bed covers, slit from side to side.

“Beverly brought them for me,” Will explained, sniffing and holding out his hand; Jack handed over the photo and Will put it with the others, “you have three bodies already, right? Two men, one woman, no pattern. Thought I could contribute. Nothing better to do.”

“A little light reading?”

“I’m bored.”

“Who wants to see this sort of stuff when they’re bored?”

“I do,” Will said rubbing his face with both hands, “keeps my mind off...other things,” looking at a black one shade greyer than pitch helped, or so he hoped. He sighed and avoided Jack’s eyes before looking to the window, “how have you been?”

“Can’t complain.”

“Yes you can.”

“Well I can,” Jack nodded, pulling the chair in the corner over to Will’s bedside, “but it would seem a bit much complaining about being overworked and stressed when I’m sitting next to you.”

“Don’t worry,” Will said with a dry quirk to his lips, “I can’t remember most of mine.”

Making it sound like a loss was almost humorous. In the end Will was sure he wouldn’t want to remember.

“Temporary or..?” Jack left it hanging.

“Can’t say,” Will shrugged, scratching at the underside of his forearm when the tingling there became unbearable; he took a deep breath, *don’t let it get to you*, “he had me in a medically induced coma for five and half months,” *doesn’t seem real but it is, it is*; he cleared his throat and continued almost seamlessly, “I read something once about people remembering things from when they were under, voices, conversations, but I don’t think that would help me.”

“Why not?”

“He didn’t talk much,” Will said, “just...moved things around, moved me around and...” Will blew out a puff of air, “didn’t talk other than to tell me what to do.”

An awkward silence. Jack moved in his chair and Will finally dragged his eyes across the room to glance at him. He looked haggard, Will wouldn’t lie. His skin was slightly sunken, deep bags under his eyes and a haunted look about his shoulders and mouth. Will wasn’t sure what they could say to each other. Jack seemed to have been left with all of Will’s lost time weighing on his shoulders. It

was draining to watch. In truth, one lost soul in his hospital room was enough for him, never mind two.

“How many times were you...” Jack searched for the word, eventually deciding on, “lucid?”

“Uhm,” Will swallowed, frowning uncomfortably, looking down at his hand as he counted them off with crooked fingers against his palm, “maybe four? I think I remember four that were different from the rest. But if you’re only counting me being awake enough to be able to talk, then two. I think once was a mistake; I woke up while he might have been changing the sedative. I heard bags, plastic. Not sure. The second was phoning you.”

“You remember that?” Jack looked surprised.

“Sort of,” Will said; the vague memory of soft kiss against his cheek had his stomach turning and he rushed on without stopping, “I’m full with ‘sort of’s’ right now. I don't remember much after leaving your car that afternoon.”

No need to state which afternoon, Will knew they both remembered it all too well.

“At least now you’re more than ‘sort of’ safe,” Jack said.

“Well,” Will sat back against the bed and ran a weary hand through his hair; the unremembered memories slunk around in the background, waiting their turn, “sort of.”

Jack didn’t comment. Will knew why. The man didn’t seem overly keen on talking about just how safe Will was; it only left how he’d come to be in danger unsaid. Will could see Jack’s guilt in his hunched shoulders and interlinked fingers. The sort of silence he detested the most; Will forced himself to break it, even if he didn’t feel like talking.

“Sutcliffe,” Will breathed out a rough sigh, leaning back fully to stare at the ceiling, “you know I didn’t peg him. Bit of a sycophant, ambitious, edgy, chip on his shoulder. Didn’t tack him for a murderer.”

“You didn’t see him in the interview last week. Guilty as a lark. Think our pressure was what startled him into moving Miriam and that’s how the crash happened. He panicked, there was a storm. Bit of a comedy of errors.”

“Yeah.”

“You don’t sound convinced,” Jack said, face hard.

“You didn’t see him in his office the day I had my appointment. Self obsessed and careful, that’s what I would have said. But not homicidally careful.”

“You always thought the Chesapeake Ripper would be someone successful,” Jack sounded like he was trying to bargain.

“But not overtly,” Will said, looking back down into the room, “not an in-your-face sort of success. I always saw the Ripper as a more subtle, considered person. Strange, I guess, to think about someone capable of that sort of theatrical brutality as subtle, but yeah. Sutcliffe was all about in-your-face. He had all the subtlety of a pink penguin.”

“...Pink penguin?” Jack grinned, the gloom in his eyes lifting slightly.

“I’ve been watching too much day time television, stuck in here,” Will waved him off, “nature channels. Everything else is trash. My point is that...”

“You point is that the Ripper deviated from your profile and you’re sore about it.”

“Not sore about it,” Will frowned, “just...disappointed.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously,” Will shrugged, “I always thought he’d be more...well, more. He was the one to catch, wasn’t he? The unfathomable one that got away, and away again. Intelligent, careful, considered, controlled,” he stopped when he saw the light leaving Jack’s eyes, “Now he’s just a petty, stabbed up corpse in a basement morgue.”

“No more than he deserves,” Jack said sourly.

“Yeah,” Will sighed, “don’t I know it.”

There was no real silence in a hospital, Will realised as machines beeped and huffed, people moved about past the doorway. He fidgeted nonetheless and his mind roved to places he’d rather not go but, when he was there, demanded answers.

“Still no...” he sighed, “still no sign of Abigail?”

“Not a thing so far,” Jack shook his head, “I have a train ticket out of town, heading to Richmond Virginia, but then the trail goes cold straight after. She doesn’t have a credit card to follow and we haven’t had any sightings despite plastering her face all over missing persons. Every cop stop in the country should have her postered up on the wall. They see her? We’ll hear about it.”

“She ran because of me.”

“Hey, don’t start that,” Jack said sternly, “she ran because she thought a lot of things. The people around her were in danger, she thought she was in danger from me, lots of things. She’s young Will, no matter how old she thinks she is. She’ll come round and she’ll come back. They all do in the end.”

Will felt the need to name the hundreds of missing kids who *didn’t* come home but sat, withering away, on police lists all over the country. Only he couldn’t. The thought was too dire. Instead he kept his mouth shut and let Jack bring the conversation back to where it should be.

“So, we’re working on the post-profile. Seems to be fitting together better than you would be willing to agree,” Will rolled his eyes and Jack cleared his throat, “wife divorced him two and a half years ago after she was outed in an affair.”

“An affair and a divorce?” Will said, “Good stresser for a psychotic break,” he admitted begrudgingly.

“And guess who the other guy was. David Bressinden.”

“...Really.”

“Yup.”

“I thought there was something different about him,” Will said, nodding, “more personal than the others.”

“See? You can’t beat yourself up about every little thing,” Jack said, his smile dry.

“Don’t push it,” Will replied far more harshly than he’d meant to.

“Been interviewing his colleagues,” Jack continued without flinching, “they wouldn’t say he was cold but apparently he had a temper on him. Sort that would burst out loud then be reigned back in. Big house, enough that neighbours wouldn’t pry. Big basement too.”

“I heard.”

“About the circular saw bench and the manacles on the walls?”

“Beverly showed me pictures.”

“Seems like Katz has beat me to the punch on most surprises.”

“She said he was a surgeon?”

“Two years a neurosurgeon before he changed tack.”

“Let me guess. Coincides with the divorce?”

“Bingo,” Jack clicked his fingers, “moved into neuroscience exclusively, consultant and academic fields. Wrote a lot of journal articles, not all of them accepted and the ones that were weren’t anything groundbreaking. We think he was looking for a project. Something to put him on the map. Spent a lot of time pulling volunteers in for scans.”

Will bit at his thumbnail, dragging the hard substance through his teeth. Despite his reluctance to believe the hype around Sutcliffe the thought of what it might have been made his blood race. Fucking bastard, he thought. A surge of images flashed through his head, ending with Sutcliffe slit open from cheek to cheek, Will’s hands bloody. He blinked and looked down at his hands reflexively. *Fucking* bastard.

“You think he wanted to study me.”

“I think he *was* studying you.”

“What’s new. I think I should start charging concession.”

“I don’t think that’s quite fair to the psychiatrists you’ve had before to compare them to Sutcliffe.”

“No?”

“I saw the scans he took, the ones he tried to hide, had some experts take a look at them. You could have died, Will. Would have if he didn’t treat you while you were in his...care.”

“I’ve had a lot of shrinks that made me want to hang myself, does that count?”

“You know you’re very upbeat today.”

“Just a coping mechanism,” Will rubbed the back of his neck with rough fingers, “humour works best for me.”

“Well, you could always...”

There was a polite knock and then the door opened before anyone could get a word out. He already had his mouth open to give a rebuke when he saw who was there; Will’s face lit up. Hannibal Lecter stood in the doorway, the door half closed behind him before he noticed Jack, with a small, very welcome bundle crooked in his left arm. When it saw Will its small, black eyes opened wide, its four stumpy legs began flailing, body twisting, and the most unflattering and yet endearing noise emanated from its throat.

“Hey little guy,” Will didn’t care how desperate he sounded as he hauled himself ungainly up the bed, the wires attached to his body flapping against bedposts and machinery; Pugsley was deposited swiftly onto Will’s bed where he darted into the man’s arms, whining and panting and wriggling about as if he were having a fit. Will bundled him into his arms and squashed his face against the whimpering dog.

“I did not realise you had visitors,” Hannibal said, expression genuinely pleased, “good evening Jack.”

“Hannibal, I see you’ve managed to survive the strays,” Jack said, forcing a similarly contented smile.

“They were surprisingly pleasant,” Hannibal said, looking to Will.

“Oh you furry little idiot,” Will was smiling, laughing, as Pugsley whined and licked at any skin he could reach, panting like a freight train, “you’d think I’d been gone six years, not six months.”

“And they certainly missed you, Will.”

Difficult not to hear the subtext there, perhaps because he was so desperate for it. Will glanced up at Hannibal, catching warm eyes and licking his lips. Real, he’s real and *real.* His gaze scurried away quickly, back to the contented dog in his arms.

“Well,” Jack said, clearing his throat, “I’d better get back. Still have some things to clear up at the office before I head home. I’ll come see you again soon. Clear things up.”

“Sure,” Will nodded, “thanks Jack.”

Hannibal smoothed down his coat before he took Jack’s now empty chair. Will watched him cautiously. A moment’s silence. Then a hand reached out into Will’s vision and hesitated only a few seconds before tracing his jaw, the stubble there. Will let out a huffing laugh as Pugsley jumped up to try and lick Hannibal’s fingers. Will held him close.

“Thanks,” he said, unsure of how to start, “for looking after them. Beverly told me.”

“You do not need to thank me,” Hannibal said; he looked calmly happy and Will drank it in, “You look well.”

“Should have seen me when they brought me in,” Will said, his breath coming out in a rush as Hannibal’s fingers trailed down his throat before retreating, “I looked like the wild man of Alaska.”

“You do not suit a beard?” Hannibal asked, smiling broadly.

“I look like an overgrown bush with a man trapped in it.”

“A sight to see, I’m sure.”

“Hannibal...” Will lifted his hand.

The door opened and Will clamped his mouth shut on the words ‘*stop talking*’ and pulled back the hand which had been reaching for the lapel of Lecter’s jacket to pull the man close. Pugsley let out a sharp bark and Will stroked him, shaking the dog’s ears as he looked to the doorway.

“Hey,” the word was breathed out from Alana Bloom's softly smiling lips.

Then Hannibal stood to offer her the chair. Will sat up and tried to make himself presentable, *even if, guiltily, he just wanted her to leave.* He breathed in deeply and Pugsley whined, looking up at his visitors with a bemused expression. And Will watched as she stepped to Hannibal’s side and he

Reached

Out

And

Ran

His

Hand

Down

Her

Back

Settling at the base of her spine.

Will watched and felt the hairs on his arms rise. His staring eyes saw far more than the simple action, his fingers curling into short dog fur, his chest tightening to contain a yell that did not make it to the open air.

Only resounded in his mind like a wounded animal's cry.

He hobbled to the cafe because Beverly insisted that they get out of the building before it entombed them. It had been on the tip of his tongue, as she stood in his office door and told him what was happening, to tell her to *fuck right off*. He’d reigned it back in because it was Beverly and that was the only reason.

“Sure,” he’d said, even though he knew that the profiler in her was probably reading the subtext of *fuck right off* in his face and tight posture.

“Good, see you there.”

She hadn’t offered a lift or any help, and he was glad for that. People were acting funny around him with the crutches, and not funny ha ha; he wished it was, because then he’d be justified in wanting to kick their teeth in. No, instead all he got was sympathy. Lashings of sympathy. After a month of hard work making the nursing staff detest him, he didn’t look forward to reasserting his reputation all over again in the Academy.

It was a chill day, the light filtered weakly through grey clouds. Summer had come and gone without him. He felt dull in its wake, pulling his jacket closed and zipping it up. The cafe was small and mainly empty, for which he was glad. They sat by the window at a table without flowers in a tacky vase.

Conversation steered initially towards work because it was easy. They ate, Will barely remembering what it was even once it was in his stomach, and it was only as they sat waiting for the bill that she broached treacherous ground.

“I saw Alana yesterday.”

“Yeah?”

“She asked after you.”

“Mmm. I’d rather you didn’t tell her you mentioned it to me.”

“Let me guess. You don’t want to have to think of a convincing response?”

“It would be difficult to make it genuine. Unless it was to say something you probably wouldn’t repeat.”

Beverly finished the last of her orange juice and placed the glass back carefully on the table, her fingers lingering on the condensation covered surface.

“How long has it been?”

Asking what she was referring to would have been nothing more than an obvious stall. Will sat, lining up his used cutlery perfectly at the twenty-past of the plate before he replied.

“Long enough.”

“Long enough for what?”

“To not expect an apology.”

“Wow.”

“What?”

“Well, it’s just...” she shrugged, sitting back in her chair, “I would have thought you were looking for more than just an apology.”

“Would *you* want him back?” Will asked, forcefully folding his napkin.

“No, but then I’m not you.”

“Oh, great,” Will couldn’t stop the grunt of humour escaping, “that’s great, thanks. Think I’m a push over, is that it?”

“I think you’re in love,” Beverly said bluntly; Will’s hands stuttered and he dropped the napkin to the floor. He watched it as she continued, “and I think that you need to tell him before you lose him; prick that he is.”

“Maybe I’m not interested in getting any of it back,” Will lied, “maybe it would be best if I just didn’t bother, ever again. I could be a hermit. Being a hermit suits me.”

“I can’t disagree with the truth,” Beverly smiled while Will stared at the middle of the table, biting the inside of his lip, “but honestly I think I’d rather see more of you than less of you.”

“I think I get it now,” Will said, smirking, “you’re not working for Alana, you’re working for Jack.”

“Not guilty,” she held up her hands, smiling, “although I think that you better watch your back when you’re able to run, jump and hop on your own again. Jack had so much success with you on the team that even Purnell couldn’t deny it.”

“Is he getting a commendation,” Will asked, “for the Ripper?”

“Worse,” Beverly said as the bill arrived, “they’re trying to promote him.”

“Oh, he’ll *love* that,” Will said wryly.

They halfed it and Will threw in the tip. The sky had darkened while they were inside, threatening rain as they walked back to work.

“Are they giving you anything for it?” Beverly asked while they waited at the lights, "Catching the Ripper, I mean."

“Yeah,” Will said, “they're giving me my job back.”

“Their generosity never fails to amaze me.”

“It could have been worse, they could have still forced me through the review board for what happened with Gideon.”

“They were really still going to do that?” Beverly asked, looking surprised.

“Yeah,” Will sighed, stopping to adjust his crutches beneath his armpits, “until Jack put in an appeal. I think the proof that I was suffering from advanced encephalitis was enough to quell their bloodlust. Still, no fieldwork for a while. Kind of a blessing in disguise.”

They parted ways at the compound entrance, Beverly walking up to the main building while Will walked the long way round to the Academy annexe to set up his lecture.

“Don’t scare your new students too badly now,” she said; Will could tell she was just forcing a sociable face on things but he didn’t comment.

Will clicked the pointer and the digital slide changed to a long list of well laid out words. He looked back to his class. No need to look at the screen when he had the thing memorised.

“And this is it, something you should be familiar with already,” he said, “Stone’s scale is loosely divided into three tiers. First are impulsive evil-doers,” he clicked again and a blue line appeared against the scale, delineating the numbers he referenced, “those driven to a single act of murder in a moment of rage or jealousy. Next are people who lack extreme psychopathic features,” another click, another line, this one yellow “but may be psychotic — that is, clinically delusional or out of touch with reality. Last are the profoundly psychopathic,” the last line was red, “or as Stone says himself, “those who possess superficial charm, glib speech, grandiosity, but most importantly cunning and manipulativeness. They have,” he emphasised the words as he spoke, “no remorse for what they have done to other people”.”

Quiet but for keys clicking and eyes watching. Normally he would have stood up and walked around, made it easier on the tension, but he was confined to his chair. It felt suffocating but he ignored it, pushing on.

“Alright,” he said, “so you’ve seen it, hopefully studied it. Laid out all neat and tidy. Only life isn’t neat and tidy, as you know, things don’t always fall into happy little delineations. People aren’t that considerate. So,” he looked up to the gloom of faces, “how about a little start of term test.”

It wasn’t a question and yet he could almost hear the worried groans as his students looked to each other. *No one told us there’d be a test*, he thought would be the main complaint running through most heads. Well, life wasn’t considerate in its surprises either, he thought as his eyes slid to the crutches leaning against his desk.

“Right, it’s simple. I call out a name, you tell me where on the scale and why,” another click and a familiar faced popped onto the screen.

“Ted Bundy,” Will called out; he searched the two hands that sprang up immediately before others began crawling up; he pointed to a young, pale woman with brown hair, “what’s your name?”

“I’m Fisher,” when she hesitated Will rolled his hand for her to continue, “oh, uh, s-seventeen.”

“Very good,” Will said, “but I don’t want lucky guesses, tell me why.”

“Bundy was a sexual predator,” she said, voice losing its shy waver, “lured and killed at least twenty eight girls that we know of as he worked his way down through Florida in the seventies, and continued killing after he escaped from Colorado prison from nineteen seventy seven to seventy eight. He was a sexually perverse psychopath.”

“Exactly,” Will nodded, “rape was his primary motive and his victims were killed to hide the evidence. Although, once he got a taste for it, murder became part of his MO, so don’t be so quick to pigeonhole him. Right, ok,” he clicked, “John List.”

This time he selected a young, black man with high cheekbones in the front row.

“My name is Grant,” he said, his voice a rich baritone, “I’d say List was either eight or ten. He didn’t kill because he was a psychopath, he killed to get rid of spectators like his wife and children, they witnessed his failure, but his mother, well, there’s some that say she was a rage killing. That there might have been resentment there...”

“Yes, nice, thank you,” Will said, lifting a hand to halt Grant as he opened his mouth to continue, “Now you’re getting it. The scale isn’t a be all and end all, it’s a guide. Don’t be hemmed in by it, *use* it, flex it around what you need to understand these people. Now: Cindy Campbell.”

A hand shot up; Will pointed.

“Cheryl Lawson, sir. I’d say she ranked at three. She didn’t actively commit murder, claimed to be driven to asking her partner to kill her parents as she was a victim of incest.”

“Good. Let’s jump the other way. Kallinger,” Will selected someone whose face he couldn’t properly see; the far left of the lecture theatre was blocked by a bright light.

“I’m Heather, umm, twenty-two because he started with terrorising families with his son but his motives became sexual when they killed and raped a nurse here in Baltimore.”

“That is a well stated point, although I would say that you’re missing a heavy link to the twentieth part of the scale. Kallinger was diagnosed as a schizophrenic and the motive of ninety percent of his homicides was based firmly in the prolonged torture of his victims. If you want a clear cut case of a Twenty-two look no further than Dahmer,” Will said, precisely annunciating his words, “now let’s get a little bit up to date. The Chesapeake Ripper.”

He picked at random, “Fourteen,” said a female voice, “he was...”

“No,” Will cut them off, picking another.

“Eighteen, he didn’t seem to prolong...”

“No,” Will interrupted again, his voice blunt and loud, he picked another.

“Twenty?”

“*No*,” he said, moving on quickly, “come on people,” he picked again from the blinded left hand of the theatre.

“All of them and none of them.”

The words ‘good, *very* good’ had been half way to his mouth before he choked on them. He recognised the voice. Couldn’t *not* recognise that voice. Will hesitated, licking his lips, and then lowered his pointing hand.

“Yes,” he said, staid, “that’s right. Good. Right,” he cleared his throat, *just keep going*, “I’m not saying that the scale isn’t applicable to the Chesapeake Ripper, but it’s a little more complex than your answer,” Will could imagine the subtle smile there on full lips, “he spans so many of the categories that it renders the scale a little pointless: there’s a little bit of eight in his early kills, then some eleven and twelve when necessary to keep his identity a secret, a bit of seven in David Bressinden, then a heavy dose of fourteen and then we’re up into sixteen, and remember Miriam Lass she adds a twist of twenty-one. And even after we’ve ploughed our way through the numbers

he has traits not mentioned in the scale at all, such as the bizarre level of empathy for the killers he helped to complete their work, Lawrence Wells, Elliot Budish, maybe more, maybe even Garrett Jacob Hobbs."

He stopped when he realised he had lost track of the rising enthusiasm in his voice. Will sat back in his chair and checked his watch. Looking back up to the source of the voice still gave him no view. He cleared his throat and rounded up.

"What I was trying to get at with this demonstration," he said, "is that the scale is a useful tool, very useful because it groups together traits, makes a nice, level stereotype for you to cookie cutter out basic, working profiles. It can even show you progressions: killers always move up the scale, never down it. But," he paused, "be cautious. Never work in absolutes because absolutes only exist in your mind, not theirs. You can't get a better example than the Chesapeake Ripper because, while he may be dead, he redefines our understanding of a psychopath and how they operate. When you move into your own investigations or your seniors ask you to mock them up a profile, and they *will* spring this sort of stuff on you when you don't have notes to hand or time to revise, remember what the human mind is capable of. Remember the scale but don't be defined by it."

Rapt silence. Will couldn't say he didn't enjoy it.

"Alright, that's all for today," he said, "you've been sent the lecture timetable, so read up on the next topic before coming or you will be put on the spot," the sounds of people standing, clearing up paper and closing down laptops, "Any questions then email me, the address is on the slides which I will have up on the intranet later today," the sound of footsteps down stairs; Will stood up with help from the desk as support, leaning against it heavily, "and I have a drop-in hour at three on Wednesdays, although I can't always guarantee I'll be in."

When he looked up he was glad to see it wasn't who he had expected. Grant stood by his desk, waiting patiently, and Will focused on his papers as the student remained to be acknowledged. The sound of the door whumping shut but further footsteps still audible made Will's shoulders stiffen.

"Have a question Grant?" he asked as he shuffled his lecture notes into precise order and slid them into his briefcase.

"Yes," Grant said, sounding cautious, "actually...I was just wondering why you called every killer by their names except the Chesapeake Ripper?"

"I would be cautious," said the voice from behind the veil, approaching the pool of light to reveal Hannibal Lecter dressed in a subdued navy blue, "psychoanalysing your lecturer could give you dire results."

"I...I wasn't intending to..." Grant said, surprised.

"Yes, you were," Will said as Hannibal gave Grant an effortlessly supercilious look, "and are also quite aware of my involvement with him, I'm sure. Let's just keep any inquiries to relevant ones, ok?"

"Right, sorry," Grant nodded to Will but didn't cow tow; Will liked that.

"Good work today," he said as the man turned to leave, "you have a keen, inquiring mind. Keep that up. Just don't turn it where it doesn't need to be, alright?"

“Thanks,” Grant said, a small, triumphant smile on his face; he looked as if he would say more but, after a look between Hannibal and Will, turned to leave.

Will sorted the rest of his notes, his slide layout, turned off the projector and limped his way to his crutches with his palms flat on his desk, before he acknowledged Hannibal at all. Even then, it was only to realise that the man had taken Will’s briefcase and jacket, carrying them without a word. Will inhaled and then swallowed, staring at his things in Lecter’s hands.

“Next time I’d rather you just made an appointment,” Will said, turning to walk towards the doors, “or call. You have my number.”

“I was not certain whether you would answer if I called you,” Hannibal said, walking a step ahead so he could hold the door open for Will.

“So jumping out of my lecture theatre like a jack in the box is a better option?” Will asked firmly, edging his way through the door.

“It appears to be working so far.”

“Don’t hold your breath.”

“I thought that we could perhaps be civilised about this. It appears I was wrong.”

“Take all of your degrees to figure that one out?”

“Actually I think a person would have to be deaf and blind not to sense your animosity.”

It was light and airy out in the corridors of the third floor, far more than the cramped feel to the offices on the sixth and the cold atmosphere of the lower labs. Will was glad that, being on crutches, people moved out of the way for you automatically, because he wasn’t watching where he was going. When he looked up Hannibal was holding another door open for him, leading to the elevators. He wished he could just leave but Hannibal had his things and there was no easy, dignified way to storm out on crutches.

Hannibal called the elevator and they waited.

“I had thought,” Hannibal said, making Will shift about in annoyance, “that we might remain friends Will. Yet you have not contacted me in over a month.”

“Do we have to do this here?” he asked.

“We could go somewhere private, if you prefer?”

“Not really.”

“Well, then here is as good as anywhere,” Hannibal said, continuing, “is there any chance that we might realign?”

“Not while you’re still testing me,” Will said acidly.

The elevator dinged open, blessedly empty, and Will went first. Hannibal followed him with a slightly curious expression.

“Do explain,” he said once the doors closed.

“Explain your own ideas to you? Is there any point?”

“I don’t think I...”

“God, you must think I’m a *complete* moron,” Will said, unable to stand it; he turned to Hannibal, staring at him angrily, “ever since we met you’ve been doing it. You must have thought you were so damn subtle. Always testing me, *everyone’s* always testing me aren’t they. You tell me I’m crazy and then you wait until I ask for your help; you tell me you don’t want to be my psychiatrist anymore and then you wait for me to come crawling back to you, begging for it. You force me with revelations about Abby, keeping things back and then, when I react, hauling them out in the open to see what I’ll do. You force me with the needle just to see, you watch me, fucking *watch me* with Gideon...”

The ground floor dinged and Will snapped his mouth shut as the doors slid open to reveal three people waiting. They moved out of the way as Will hobbled past, Hannibal behind him. The lobby was busy at this time of evening and Will navigated carefully, heading for the separate elevator down to the car park. Once they stepped inside and the doors closed on them again, Will opened his mouth, unable to stop the sharp words.

“It’s not the fact that you’re with her that pisses me off.”

“No?” Hannibal asked as if curious about the weather.

“You’re not interested in Alana.”

“I would say that is not entirely accurate,” Hannibal said, “she means a great deal to me, but I am not dull to your meaning. We were convenient for each other.”

“You don’t even deny it,” Will said to himself incredulously, shaking his head, “you know, I think she probably sees it as more than just convenience.”

“That would be unfortunate.”

“Fuck, listen to you,” Will bit out, his temper flaring, “toying around like an indecisive child. Does any of this matter to you? At all? What was I? Just another *convenience*?”

“Certainly not,” Hannibal smiled, watching the buttons for the floors light up as the passed, “you are very much an inconvenience for me, Will. Yet I care for you nonetheless.”

“Oh shut your damn mouth,” Will said, “I don’t want to hear it.”

“No need to be impolite,” Hannibal said, though his smile was still in place.

“I’ve got every reason to be impolite,” Will said, hauling himself quickly out into the chill of the car park as the doors opened, “especially when you’re projecting.”

“It seems you are not the only one being psychoanalysed today,” Hannibal said, tipping his head left and down, lips slightly pursed as he followed Will to his car.

The rhythmic clack of his crutches on the hard floor rang out like a staccato heartbeat, followed by slower, calmer footsteps. Will leaned against his car before unlocking the boot to slide his crutches

inside. When he looked up from his task Hannibal was putting his jacket and his briefcase into the backseat. Will used the car as support to reach the driver's side door. He had the door open as the question stopped him

"If I may ask," Hannibal said, "and I hope I am more qualified to than your students, why it is that you do not call the Chesapeake Ripper by his given name?"

Will stood stock still. A foolish notion drifted through his mind. *Don't say it*, his mind told him sternly, and yet he had already crossed that line a long time ago. What was it Beverly had told him? Everyone thought Jack had pushed him up to the edge and now he was pushing himself over. At the time he'd felt indignant to the notion of, as Hannibal put it, his *self abuse.* Now...he knew he had. What was the point in hiding behind words and pleasantries? You've been through enough shit, he told himself, why don't you just live your life without trying to please everyone else for once?

"I don't call him by his given name," Will said as he turned with difficulty to face Hannibal, standing pristine behind him under the artificial lights, "because Donald Sutcliffe is a poor man's Chesapeake Ripper and, just because he had evidence coming out his pores, doesn't mean I have to like it."

It would have been impossible to stop, even if half of him wished it and half of him didn't. Hannibal gripped Will's right arm with a steely hand and jerked him against the car, stumbling. Will let out a huff of protest, the sound trying to become words that never found purchase because a solid body had pressed itself against him and hands held him steady as his mouth was captured. The unflattering sound of acceptant elation his throat let slip was mortifying. Almost as much as the twitch in his cock at the contact, or his left hand that had curled into Lecter's jacket on instinct; or the other which had slipped up to wrap its fingers around Hannibal's throat and squeeze.

Lecter stalled, backing away only enough for Will to see his hand around Lecter's long, pale throat. Everything else still touched, everything else still pressed tightly against the other. Hannibal's face was calm, almost impassive but for the glint of hunger in his eyes. Will felt Hannibal's Adam's apple bobbing against his palm and knew he was shaking, eyes wide as he stared at the very wrong, *so very wrong,* sight before his eyes.

Stared at it.

"Oh god," he breathed out, feeling an answering hardness digging into his thigh; he pulled his hand back as if Hannibal's skin were scalding, breaking eye contact and huffing out, "I need to go."

"...As you wish," Hannibal said, standing back as Will grabbed for the door and hauled himself inside.

Lecter stood and watched him as he pulled out and drove away. Will kept his foot on the gas and didn't look back.

He knew, if he did, the temptation to slam on the brakes would win out over his dignity.

Leur Font du Mal ou Leur Causent du Tort (première partie)

Chapter Notes

Title translation:
"Leur Font du Mal ou Leur Causent du Tort" - 'Do Them Wrong'

This is a psychological term relating to someone having a hard, suspicious and skeptical attitude towards other people and their motivations; vigilant in case other people 'do them wrong'

“The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of the infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far.”
H.P. Lovecraft

“I don’t want to talk to her Jack. I don’t want to meet up with her and whichever shrink you have waiting in the wings, and talk about whatever shared, imaginary bond they think we should have. Am I clear about this?”

Will Graham stood, handle of his vacuum cleaner in one hand and phone in the other, waiting for the reply he needed.

“You’re acting like this was my idea,” Jack eventually said with a sigh.

“Frankly I don’t care whose idea it was. I’m not interested because, for one, it’s a futile exercise in dealing with trauma and, for two, it doesn’t fucking work. You know how long it’s taken me just to stop dreaming about it every night? You want to dredge all that back up because some shit from the Inspector General’s office thinks I’m a liability?”

“Normally I’d agree with you,” Jack said, sounding unimpressed, “but you were the one who put yourself in this mess. You’re lucky your student doesn’t want to take this further than just a complaint.”

“Oh *come on.* I pulled *one* of them up to the front for a demonstration,” Will said, exasperated.

“You made her hyperventilate,” Jack said strongly, “probably because you were making her imagine what it was like to rape and kill someone.”

“She signed up for my damn classes,” Will bit out, “she’ll have worse on the job. If she can’t handle the idea she should drop out. It’s not like I put a knife in her hand and asked her to gut someone.”

“I think you’re missing the bigger picture here,” Jack sounded cold.

“Yeah? Well then why don’t they just fucking fire me?”

“I didn’t call you to listen to your shit, Will. I called to make you do something about it before it comes to that. Dr. Lecter stopped consulting with us not long after you went missing, only agreed to help us with your search and nothing else. We’ve been left out to dry, Will. I want you back and it’s not going to happen unless you get some *help*.”

“I am not sitting down in room with Miriam Lass,” Will knew he was on the verge of shouting, “and listening to her relive every moment of the worst two years of her life and feeling what she felt and *understanding* it because I went through the same fucking thing! And if you or anyone else makes me you’ll be seeing my damn resignation before you get the chance to throw me out!”

“Will...”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

“Look,” Jack was angry now, “the last thing I need is you having a god damned nervous breakdown because you refuse to deal with what happened. You won’t do what they want? Alright, then what will you do? Can I call Doctor Lecter and maybe..?”

Will hung up the phone and threw it across the room. Luckily it landed on the couch with a distinctly soft thump, disappearing under a cushion as if to hide. Without waiting to see if he was called back Will jammed on the vacuum cleaner and continued tidying the house. An hour and a half later, with the kitchen sparkling, the bathroom pristinely white and all the floors, curtains and furniture vacuumed, cupboards and wardrobes resorted, Will sat down on the couch and stared at the far wall, fingers interlaced. The sound of the washing machine from the utility room rushing through its spin cycle was the only reprieve from the words tumbling in his skull.

*Can I call Doctor Lecter and maybe...*maybe what? Ask him to make Will stop being crazy now he had no excuse not to be? To stop scaring people? To start being just like everyone else? That’s what everyone wanted to say, right? Only none of them had the guts to speak up, tell the truth as they saw it, even though it wasn’t the damned truth as far as he was concerned. Because he knew what they thought: Will was convenient when they needed him, but the rest of the time he was just a dirty little secret.

The worst part was perhaps how wrong Jack was. It wasn’t what he remembered that troubled him. The fragments he had were short, disturbing chapters in a large empty book; and it was that emptiness which tipped the balance between coping and not-fucking-coping. It was the emptiness that made him wake feeling sick, made him snap at people, hate getting up in the morning, hate going to sleep at night, hate the idea of company, friends, *more*. Will knew the hidden memories lurking in his psyche were the evils driving him far crazier than those he could see within his own mind’s eye.

No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t remember. He couldn’t even begin to understand how to remember. It wasn’t a fog or a haze, but a gap; like edited film skipping from one scene to the next. For him his mind told him a few days had passed, and for everyone else half a year had flicked by. Half a year in which everything had irrevocably changed. After three weeks back at work, falling into old routines and slipping back into what was left of his life, he had convinced himself he didn’t need to remember. Things would slowly fall back into place. He just had to believe they would.

Then Heather MacPhillips has a panic attack in his lecture theatre and suddenly there are inquiries and instant suspicion and official paperwork, and the words *disturbed* and *post traumatic stress* and

psychiatric review were being bandied about. Will was beginning to wonder if anything could truly fall back into place, the way it had been. Or if things had always been this bad and he'd just become complacent to it. Truthfully everything was out of joint, the wood warped, and now, sitting on his couch with his hand under the couch cushions looking for his phone, he knew he'd just have to accept that.

Understand just how far he'd fallen rather than deny it.

Will couldn't stop the start of surprise as the phone in his hand rang shrilly. He let out a long breath and shook off the rapid beat of his heart, looking down at the screen.

-*Hannibal* calling...-

Jack's a fast worker, Will thought with little humour. The phone was unceremoniously dumped back under the couch cushion where its muted ring was suffocated. He left it to die and went to hang up his laundry.

The small room smelled of dusty air conditioning and hot lights. No windows, just grey walls, a large table and four chairs. Will had leant his crutches against the table and thankfully the third interviewer, someone named Gary Reegar from I.A., had pulled out Will's chair for him.

He wondered if the truth would be the story they liked best. Will knew what Oversights would want, what they were desperate for, and he wasn't sure he could give it to them. Despite the momentary team effort between himself and Reegar, they were now opposed. A row of three strict faces sitting across the table, Reegar, Purnell and Hatcher, watching him with their best guess at sympathetic authority.

"Then you remember nothing after one p.m. on Tuesday the nineteenth of April?" Purnell asked, her head jutting forwards from her body; Will thought she looked like a starved hawk trying to grab for meat it couldn't reach.

"No," Will said peremptorily, "I remember some things. It's all in my report."

"Yes, I see you have some vague memories of," Hatcher leafed through his report, "sounds and smells. Those I understand. Only there's something here I can't place."

Will watched him carefully. The emotionless way with which they referred to his trauma both calmed him, as it kept it distant, but also angered him, as it made his ordeal sound like just another statistic.

"A book," Hatcher said, looking up under his grey hair with grey eyes to match, "and that's all you have. You say you remember a book. Would you mind expanding on that?"

It was instinct to say no to everything. If he said no to everything this interview would be over before it even began. Only he knew that was a falsity. They would be there until Oversights and Internal Affairs were satisfied and the Inspector General knew he could put the call out to the Media Liaison to flood the local newspapers with the headline 'Chesapeake Ripper confirmed dead'.

“I don’t really remember much other than the book,” Will shrugged, “I just remember opening it, I can...see it in my hands. Page torn in half on the right. Drop of blood on the page. Then that’s it. That’s all there is.”

“Do you remember which book?”

“Does it sound like I remember which book it was?” Will asked caustically.

Silence, thinned lips and shared glances between his judges were his only reply. Will sat back in his chair, rubbed at his chin and tried to relax. Being antagonistic would only make this last longer.

“So you don’t remember what led you to Donald Sutcliffe’s house?” Purnell asked.

“What makes you think I went to his house?”

“Well, you found a book which,” she reached for a brown folder and opened it to reveal a stack of photographs; leafing through she found the one she wanted and held it up, “matches the description of this one perfectly. Found in Sutcliffe’s house in his bookcase.”

“What’s the name?”

“Excuse me?” she asked.

“I asked the name of the book.”

“It’s The Iliad,” *she said, “now...”*

“Bressinden,” Will said to himself, trying desperately to remember, “the book taken from the George Peabody Library.”

“Yes,” Hatcher said, interrupting when Purnell looked like she might start snapping; she sat back from the table and crossed her arms, watching Will closely, “it was confirmed as the source of the message left on David Bressinden’s body. The paper is a match and the blood spot is Bressinden’s.”

Will bit at his right thumbnail and stared at the table, his mind rushing off without them. Why keep it? he thought, Why would the Ripper keep a trophy? The man didn’t do the usual, he didn’t take trinkets, he didn’t keep the bodies to revisit and relive the kill. He didn’t do the average serial killer shtick because he wasn’t in any way average. So why keep the book?

“A victim which you yourself told Jack Crawford was an aberrant kill,” Reegar finally spoke up, breaking Will’s concentration, “that there was an emotional attachment to the victim.”

“That’s not what I said.”

“No?” Purnell jumped in.

“No,” Will reiterated firmly, “I said that there was something different about his choice in Bressinden and the manner in which he disposed of him, not that he was aberrant in terms of behaviour.”

“That’s the same thing...” Hatcher started, frowning.

“The Chesapeake Ripper doesn’t have aberrances,” Will said strictly.

“Didn’t,” Hatcher corrected him, “he didn’t have aberrances.”

A long breath did little to calm his surging blood and frazzled nerves. Will felt like a broken lighthouse on the shore with three large cargo ships before him heading for the rocks. Worst part? He wouldn’t feel sorry for them when they ran aground and the crew fell fowl of the chill rip tide.

Paper was shuffled and the room was filled with the sound of it, as well as clearing of throats and shifting in chairs.

“You also said that you remembered the smell of what you thought might be his cologne,” Reegar seemed to be speaking up more now that Purnell was noticeably irate.

“That’s right,” Will nodded.

Without another word a bottle was produced, sitting elegant within its see through evidence bag, and placed upon the table. Reegar donned a set of gloves and broke the seal, making Will feel very uncomfortable. Is that..*? he thought,* it must be. *Reegar stood and walked around the table towards him, open bottle in hand. Will knew what he wanted but, even when it was offered, it took him long enough for Reegar to look uncomfortable before Will worked up the courage to lean forwards and inhale.*

Wood smoke, spicy wood smoke, followed by Instant-Overbearing-Fear. Will was unable to stop the reaction, or the widening of his eyes, the parting of his lips and the stuttering sound of breath that escaped. He sat back into his chair and put his hands firmly on the arms, licking his lips. Hatcher had the good grace to look sympathetic. Purnell couldn’t contain her look of vindication.

“Is this the same?” Reegar asked as he reclosed the bottle and set about sealing the bag and re-dating it.

“...Yes,” Will said.

“Sutcliffe wore it,” Purnell said, “we’ve confirmed it with others...”

“Look, I’m not stupid,” Will cut in sharply, looking down at the desk, “you don’t give a shit about what I wrote in my report except the addendum. Right?” he managed to glance up, “I don’t agree that Sutcliffe was the Ripper and that’s a spanner in the works. I get it*.”*

“No, I don’t think you do get it,” Purnell said patronisingly, leaning forwards and clasping her hands, “because right now what you’re *doing is keeping a city under the yolk of fear of a dead man.”*

“Donald Sutcliffe doesn’t fit,” he said, over annunciating.

“A profile isn’t the be all and end all,” Hatcher said, shaking his head.

“Of which I am well aware. But this is different.”

“So you’re trying to say you had him all summed up but couldn’t find him?”

“Yes,” Will said bluntly, “that’s exactly what I’m saying. And Sutcliffe didn’t fit.”

“You met the man once,” Purnell said, arrogantly disbelieving.

“Ha...Dr Lecter spoke about him on occasion,” Will said, lifting his hand before carelessly dropping it down to his thigh.

“And that’s enough for you to build a working profile?” Purnell asked skeptically, shaking her head.

Will didn’t lean forwards or move. He merely linked his gaze with Purnell’s unconvinced stare and held it. She didn’t look openly uncomfortable at the sudden focus she was under, but he could tell she was. A subtle fidget of her hand into her hair, Will noticed, and her blinks increased two fold while she held his stare.

“I can build a working profile, Agent Purnell,” he said slowly, “from the way someone lays a dinner table. Don’t question my abilities.”

“Miriam Lass has confirmed Sutcliffe as her captor,” Hatcher butted in before things got ugly.

“And he had her for over two years,” Will argued back, “god knows what he could have done to her in that time. Could probably have had her believing she was abducted by moon people and she’d swear it was one hundred percent true.”

“That’s a little far fet...” Reegar began as Purnell let out a discourteous huffing laugh and shook her head.

“Why did he let her see his face?”

That shut them up. They stared at him and Will managed to stare back.

“It’s a legitimate question,” he said, “he let her see his face. I’ve read her report, it states quite clearly that she recognised him. That’s why she didn’t hesitate to kill him once she managed to get out of the trunk. Then why didn’t I ever see his face? If I wasn’t blindfolded then I was unable to open my eyes. Why would he care? I never saw him and I barely heard him. When he spoke he spoke in whispers. She said he spoke in a normal voice which she could understand. Why?”

“Well he was clearly obsessed with you,” Purnell said.

Another folder opened, another splay of plastic sealed papers spread out across the tabletop. Will recognised the red banner of Tattlecrime *at the heads of some, newspaper headlines above others. The only link between them was the sight of his own face blazoned somewhere on each one, or his name in stark black typeface, staring back at him. Will bit at the inside of his cheek and took a deep breath. It doesn’t fit, he thought, it doesn’t fit him.*

“He had screeds of these, some from before you even entered your post at the Academy. Look, here,” she picked one up; an old newspaper clipping from his days in the NOPD. A small snippet: Local Cop Saves Child from Crazed Father, “and the ink used to print these out? Matches the ink and paper used to send the threats to Bressinden.”

“You think he’d be that careless?” Will scoffed, “To use his own printer? Come on!”

“The amount of evidence against him is insurmountable,” Hatcher said stoutly, his grey eyes sharp, “the sooner you open your eyes and see that, the sooner we can all move on from this. His basement was a body chop-shop Graham, a storage container registered in his name had your car inside and a host of trophies taken from the victims, he knew *you had encephalitis and he* knew

how to treat it because he was the only god damned neurological specialist who knew you even had it. For god's sakes the cabin where Agent Crawford recovered you was his holiday home!"

"Then what did he do with organs?" Will said, refusing to acknowledge Hatcher, "You say he took trophies? The Ripper doesn't take trophies, he takes body parts. And what does he do with them? We don't know, we've never known, but I sure as hell am sure he doesn't do it for fun. You didn't find a refrigeration unit in the basement, nothing to keep things fresh. Hell he didn't even have a freezer big enough to freeze a body, but we know he froze them. How can you just hand wave away all these blatant holes in your theory?"

"This is pointless," Reegar sat back, chucking his pen onto the table and putting his chin in his hand while Hatcher and Purnell, while obviously as fed up as their colleague, simply continued to stare at Will resolutely.

"All I'm saying is," Will said stoutly, "that you have no evidence placing Sutcliffe at any of the previous murder scenes attributed to the Chesapeake Ripper. The book could have been planted, the basement planted, the tow truck planted, the 'trophies', the blood, Miriam Lass, me, everything could have been set up. All that you have is essentially circumstantial and, quite frankly, raises more questions than it answers."

To put it lightly, that hadn't gone down well.

The large, yellow, flashing detour sign sent him downtown. Will took it with a wide turn of his steering wheel and the Volvo's large tyres bounced as he went up and over a speed bump. He quickly left the bright lights of the highway behind him, sweeping into the run down and the desolate.

He felt his phone vibrate a ring in his jacket pocket, ignoring it as he focused on the road. He already knew who it would be. The last thing he needed was to see the man's name and ruin his budding appetite.

Inner city, east-side, Baltimore; brown lots, ramshackle shops and the pervasive orange glow of the street lamp. Will let it wash past him like sewage. Sometimes the city showed its colours, he thought. Not the glitzy class of the Lyric Opera House, or the quaint beauty and the classic architecture of the old town. This was where people lived and breathed, squatted and drank, struggled and died.

The boarded up shop fronts sat like mummified corpses. Will stopped at a red light and stared at a group of five kids on the other side of the crossing, playing basketball in a dusty lot through a hoop that looked more like a steel rim nailed to the side of a board. Yet, without the artifice of the city trying desperately to pretend there was no such thing as urban disorder, it was difficult not to get lost in their enthusiasm.

There were two players on the team wearing shirts. The skins had three. Refereeing was by acclimation, it seemed. A small skin, shoved down in the rebounding, stalked home mad. Of those that remained some jeered, some tried to encourage him back. Still, now the numbers were even the game continued. Somehow the shouting and the thump of the ball lifted his spirits. The only reason Will stopped watching was the sudden, blaring horn behind him. He looked up; the light was green. He drove on, leaving the gleeful children behind him.

Half way to finding his route back to the highway Will gave up and decided to pull in at a small, corner grocery store which he happened to be passing. Sat opposite a junk yard it didn't look particularly appetising but Will wasn't fussy. Food was food and, right then, his legs were beginning to ache and he just wanted to get home as quickly as possible. Today had been a slow burn and he wasn't willing to let it come to a head with him stranded because his calf muscles seized up.

The air was chill and pulled his jacket closed, zipping up the front, before slamming the car door shut. The sound stirred up an excess of barks from across the street. Will looked up to find a Rottweiler tied to the tall metal fence of the junk yard, barking rapidly. The twisted metal of cars and engines and unidentifiable scrap towered in mutated piles, making the dog seem small in their midst. Will watched for a minute, waiting. Eventually the dog tired of the continuous bark and let out a long whine before trying to turn around and lie down. The short leash halted its progress and the dog stumbled before simply sitting down on the ground. Will felt his hands curl to fists in around his crutches as he forced himself into the store. He shopped curtly. In the dog food isle he knew he was buying too many cans. Were his hands trying to convince him before his mind did? He didn't make conversation with the teller even though they tried to engage him.

It was an hour before he was done. When he returned to the car with his shopping cart, leaning heavily on it, the sun was setting behind the low-building skyline. The dog was still there, sitting by the fence. Will glanced over every time he lifted a bag and put it into the boot. After the third bag he stopped. Enough at home already that feeding them all was difficult on his budget, as were vets bills, and new dogs always brought a host of vets bills, and what if the others didn't like..? Will stopped thinking when he looked back over at the lone dog in the gloom, panting. He looked around the mainly deserted area and gave in.

The tool case he kept in his boot was overstocked, he knew he always carried too much, but today he was reaping the benefits. He pulled out the bolt cutters from the box, a packet of casserole steak from one of the shopping bags, and hobbled across the street. Once he was within fifteen feet the dog was on its feet again, *bark, bark, bark*, but Will ignored it.

It was his principal to only take the free runners, the ones with no leads and no owners to care for them but this...this made his blood run cold and hot all at once, seeing a dog left like this. As far as he was concerned, he thought as he tore open the thin, gummy plastic covering the meat and threw a few chunks through the fence, at that moment he would relish a confrontation with the owner; it would give him something interesting to do with the bolt cutters.

"There you go buddy," he said softly, smiling as the dog ceased its barking and leapt on the meat, slurping it from the dirty ground; he chucked a few more, "you hungry, huh?"

The dog didn't answer with a growl or a bark, but instead bright eyes which stared at him rapt. Will's smile broadened.

"Yeah," he said dryly, "I thought you might be."

A few more chunks were thrown through as Will crept closer and eventually, after he rested his crutches against the metal, managed to shimmy his way down the fence and sit on the cold sidewalk. He took his time so as not to overload the starving dog's stomach. It was another few chunks before Will risked his luck and his fingers. He held out a piece of meat on his palm and curved his hand, just enough to put it flat against the fence. The dog took it with a rough tongue

and Will laughed as it licked his fingers clean of the blood. He put his fingers through the fence and continued until all the meat was gone.

Will looked the dog over, thinking him a bit of a runt for a male, seeing a few marks on the back legs, scars, and something that looked open and bloody near the tail. As well as that the dog was actually female. Unusual choice, he thought, for a guard dog. Also, as far as Will was concerned, she was pretty heavy round the belly for a starving junkyard dog. He forced himself to remain calm for her sake.

By the time he was done the sun had sunk to a dull glow and the stars were coming out. He realised he was cold from sitting on the freezing sidewalk by the fence and made to get up. The whine that the dog let out was enough to make Will feel the need to break the fingers of whoever had put her there, or worse.

“Don’t worry,” he said quietly, “it’s ok. You want to come home with me?”

He lifted the bolt cutters and the first snip was put through the wires where the dog’s leash was tied. Still, even as Will worked as quickly as he could to snip enough to be able to pull open a section of the fence, the dog did not run or even move at all until he was finished. Will looked around him quickly before reaching down and hauling open the hole he’d made. The dog pushed through with a slight waddle. Will undid the leash, a slipknot lead, and threw it back over the fence. He hurried as best he could to his car, put his groceries, his toolbox and his recycling in the backseat, and pulled out his emergency blanket.

“Think you can get up ok?” Will asked as he rolled out the blanket on the floor of the, now empty, boot, “We should really get out of here.”

The dog was panting heavily and Will patted the soft blanket. With a great heft the front paws scrabbled up but the back two seemed like a lost cause. The sound of people leaving the grocery store and the approach of more cars made Will antsy. He reached down, one hand still tight around his crutch, grabbed the dog around the top of her back legs, lifted with difficulty and pushed. He was given a whining bark and a snap with teeth for his troubles. Will didn’t resent it. He knew he’d probably worried the wound near her tail. He made sure she was properly in before shutting the boot and getting back in the driver’s seat, crutches fitted in at an odd angle across the mess of groceries and tools in the back seat. It was as he drove back home with the faint smell of dog musk on his hands and the sound of panting breath from his boot, that he realised she hadn’t had a collar on. This would be the first stray he would be able to name for himself.

Dark woods. They shouldn’t be out here. Hard to see the predators coming. Hard to see the prey disappearing. Hard to see the hunted predator sitting in the thicket. Will looked about him, catching a pale face crouched by his side.

“Do you enjoy the hunt?” Abigail asked with sincerity.

“It’s necessary,” he replied bluntly.

“But the blood flows in your veins,” she said, frowning, “just like in theirs. You should have more respect.”

They broke cover slowly, creeping across the mulch floor of pine needles and broken twigs. The air was warm, balmy, and there was a smell high on the air. A scent. Will followed it, his hands tight around his rifle. He headed towards the dark patches, always away from the light. No use looking where there was a chance at redemption.

“How did it feel to kill?”

“It was ugly Abigail, the ugliest of things.”

They continued on towards the bait. He hoped the trap had been sprung. It was as he stepped from the safety of the thicket and out into the clearing that he knew it had. The tree stood before him, thick and gnarled, twisting and ancient. The rope twisted around its boughs seemed to imitate the ropey bark on the thick beams, holding up the familiar figure there. Hair parted perfectly, face calm and mildly curious, slim maroon eyes regarding him fondly.

Hannibal stared at him, trussed and caught like a tangled fly in a spider’s web. The ropes were abrasive, red raw flesh visible against throat and wrists. A trickle of blood down into the dip of his collarbone. He resisted the urge to reach out and touch the red liquid, bring it back to his lips for a taste. Will wondered what Hannibal saw as Will smiled in return.

Then a spike of chill air. Will felt his smile melt. A broken twig from behind him. He turned slowly, unwilling to spook whatever prey had wandered near his instinct. The scent was strong. He found Abigail alone, staring at him with painful anger.

“We thought you’d understand,” she said, “why can’t you just understand?”

“Sweetheart...” he began softly.

Only a second’s warning. He felt himself turn his head to the right, faced with a line of dark trees and stillness. Then an impassive face and an ebony body leapt from behind him, claws raised, and there was enough time left to imagine them piercing his flesh as he tried to raise his gun before he sprang awake panting and clutching at his aching chest.

Winston was the first to jump up. Will stared at the dog’s inquisitive eyes, trying to slow his breathing. Eventually he reached out with a trembling hand and patted the bed beside him. Winston instantly padded forwards and lay down on Will’s right, soft fur flush against his arm. It didn’t take long for another set of paws to leap up from the left. Sascha took position across the bottom of the bed, stretching out, followed by Buster who curled up at her side. Then Lady fumbled up inelegantly, followed by Lenny who lay down to his left with a thump. Will listened to the sound of scrabbling for a few seconds, a smile fritzing on and off, before he sat up and leaned over Lenny, reaching down to scoop Pugsley up from the floor. He was deposited beside Lady on the unused pillow.

For a second’s reprieve Will wondered where the hell his new recruit, currently curled up in the utility room, was going to fit when she was ready to join them. Dog tetris was always a nightmare.

He slipped back to sleep with the sound of sleepy snuffling all around. Will hoped, as he drifted, that his pack could accompany him down through the veil. The hunt was always so much safer with them at his back.

Staring at the email, Will realised as he sat on the couch the next day eating his breakfast of toast and honey, wasn't going to make it go away.

Dear Will,

As I understand it you are not busy at the moment. I have a suggestion you may find interesting. Please make an appointment with my office.

Yours sincerely,

Doctor Frederick Chilton
Director
Baltimore State Asylum for the Criminally Insane

He had to remind himself that it had been a lot longer for Chilton than it had for Will since their last altercation. The stink of hospital filled his nose at the memory, Chilton sweating and guilty and clutching at his abdomen. Still, even without their shared animosity, Will was amazed the man had the nerve to contact him at all. Of course it still bore all the hallmarks of Chilton's usual supercilious egocentricism; using Will's first name to appear cosily intimate, the not-so-subtle jab at the fact Will wasn't teaching at the moment while the complaint against him was dealt with, and the statement of his full title at the end as if Will wasn't painfully aware of who he was.

Still, he couldn't say he wasn't mildly interested. Mildly being the operative word. Just because Chilton was a terrible psychiatrist and a failed surgeon didn't mean he couldn't be useful on occasion. If he had something Will could use then it could always be utilised without Chilton once the man divulged its contents. Will tapped his fingers against the wood of the coffee table before bashing out a reply.

Put me down for tomorrow at ten a.m. I have to take my dog to the vets.

Will

So far he wasn't begrudging his days off. He loaded his new addition to the pack, washed down with a wet cloth the night before, into the car and drove carefully. He hadn't had much time to think about his failing situation what with introducing her carefully to the others. First he had let them scent the blanket she had lain upon on the drive home. Then he'd tried to put her into the dog cage he kept for initiates but she wasn't having any of it. So in the end he'd let her sleep in the utility room where it was warmest and where the fleas he was sure she had wouldn't irritate himself or the others.

On the way his phone rang. When he pulled into the parking lot by the veterinary clinic and checked it, he felt a well of difficult feelings surge up.

Missed Call:
12:04
Hannibal

Was this to become a permanent fixture in his life? Not that he wasn't entirely capable of stonewalling the undesired; Will had lots of experience in that area. What made this all the more difficult was the fact that Hannibal wasn't exactly an 'undesired'. He was a silken tiger lying prostrate in the long grass while Will kept him steady in his crosshair, unable to pull the trigger.

In the end he'd tossed the phone onto the passenger seat and slammed the door shut behind him.

"Another 'found dog' report to file Will?"

Catherine Jayce, the receptionist and vet's assistant, was always smiling. It was the one thing Will didn't like about her. He brought the dog in behind him slowly, hand tight on her new leash in case she didn't react well to the other clients. It seemed there were only a few in; an old woman with a large Persian cat in a carrier, a middle aged man with a sad looking golden lab, and a mother and son with an exotic cockatiel who sat upon the boy's shoulder opening and closing his impressive, white plumage.

"Yeah," Will said absently as he led the dog to the desk.

"Ok," she said, already having pulled out the paperwork; some of her brown hair fell from her tight ponytail and into her face. She pushed it away and clicked her pen, "well, I can already see she's a Rotty. Hello there," she said to the dog as she peered over the counter, "Any idea how old?"

"Best guess, four or five?"

"Any ID?"

"None on her."

"Ok, then I'll need a name for the form."

"Frank."

"...Funny name for a girl," Catherine said, her eyebrow raising and her smile turning to more of a smirk as she penned it in.

"You've obviously never read *The Wasp Factory*," Will said.

"The what?"

"Doesn't matter."

"Alright, give me a moment and I'll get her a scan."

Frank stood still as a statue while Catherine ran the microchip scanner over the neck, back and hind legs. Will let out a soft sigh of relief when nothing turned up. The last thing he needed was the scumbag to have had her chipped. As far as he was concerned, she was never going back there.

"I'm guessing this is another one for the collection?"

Will looked round to see Dr Theo in the doorway leading to the examination rooms. He was a tall man, older than Will by a good twenty years, with a distinguished grey streak in his black hair and was Will's vet of choice. Had been for five years. Yet, even as Will answered him, Dr. Theo wasn't the person he was looking at.

"Yeah," he said to the vet before saying, "Hey," to Alana who stood holding a mottled brown and white dog on a leash, stopped by the doorway which Dr. Theo held open.

“Hi,” she said cautiously while her dog strained forwards to sniff at Frank who, in return, shifted to move behind Will’s legs.

“I wouldn’t let them too close,” Will said, “she might have fleas.”

“Oh,” Alana said a little distantly, nodding, pulling her dog back beside her.

“Bonnie?” he heard Dr. Theo announce loudly.

The man with the golden lab stood up and was forced to practically drag his charge through the waiting door. When Will looked away from the sight of the dog’s tail disappearing into the corridor he found Alana at the desk with Catherine settling the bill. Realising he’d have a little time before Theo was ready again Will took Frank outside, careful to keep his crutches free of tangling in her leash. She seemed unhappy in the small space of the waiting room and Will didn’t want to give the fleas a chance to spread to the other pets. They stood in the parking lot, Will slipping Frank bone shaped gravy treats out of his full pocket. She crunched them happily, always looking up at him for more with a panting tongue.

It was a couple of minutes before the door opened again. Will didn’t need to look up to know who it was. He pulled out two treats and glanced up under his glasses.

“Is it ok to..?” he asked open-endedly, lifting the treat.

“Sure,” Alana nodded.

Will chucked the treat through the air and Alana's dog jumped up on her front paws to catch it; he gave the other to Frank so she didn’t feel left out.

“Didn’t know you came here,” he asked, trying for pleasant small talk.

“I moved, month and a half ago. This is my local now.”

“Right,” Will nodded.

The sound of wind stirring the dirt, rustling the leaves of the trees and sending them floating to the ground. The silence between them seemed palpable.

“Her name’s Applesauce,” Alana finally spoke up, ruffling her dog’s ears.

“Interesting choice,” Will's smile was staid.

“She likes applesauce,” Alana shrugged, “...what’s her name?”

“Frank,” Will said.

“Oh,” Alana said, raising a brow, “and you’re badmouthing *my* choice of name.”

“It’s a long story,” Will shrugged, looking away to his left.

The last time he had seen her she’d been pale and lifeless on the hospital bed, wires slinking against her skin and a steady beep measuring out her life. Then he awoke and she was there, walking through the door of his hospital room, alive, smiling, talking...only he wasn’t able to tell her how happy he was that she was alright, that she’d come through on top, that she was going to

continue to be in his life, because everything had been doused by Hannibal's hand sliding down her back and Will's world falling apart.

He opened his mouth to say something, anything to break the silence, when he heard the phone in his car bleat out its call and interrupt their stilted conversation. He held Frank close on her leash even as she stared towards the sound, ears raised. Alana watched him, a small frown between her eyes. They stood, unmoving, until the phone stopped abruptly mid-ring. She shook her head and looked down at her feet. They both knew who it had been.

"You know, Hannibal's been really worried about you. We both have. All he wants is to know you're ok."

There was no reply he could speak aloud, because the only one appropriate to give was also the most inappropriate.

It's not all he wants

Instead of speaking the inflammatory words he stood, watching the door to the vets, hands tight around the leash in his hands. He knew that she didn't know, and it only made it worse; sordid, somehow. He was sure that Hannibal wouldn't have spoken a word to her of he and Will's affair. Hannibal had always been overly possessive of him, enough that he only made it plain how he felt when he assumed there was a threat to his dominance. And it stung more than it should have. Did you even want everyone to know about the two of you? he asked himself harshly. He surprised himself with the answer.

Yes and no. He preferred privacy, liked what was his to be his and not have to share it with the world, but...he didn't think he would have minded letting people know that he belonged to Hannibal, even with the consequences. The word was a heavy reminder - *belonged* - and his mind was already flashing off without him: *Alana tipping her head to the side as Hannibal trailed his mouth across her throat; his hands slipping up beneath her blouse; gasps swallowed by full lips.*

'It's not the fact that you're with her that pisses me off'

It had been a half truth: true that he resented Hannibal's seemingly fickle nature, but he couldn't deny the jealousy. The aching resentment whenever his imagination flared and he saw them together in his mind's eye. Reliving his own intimate moments with Hannibal but seeing himself replaced by another. Mornings were the worst. Mornings where he woke, a half-awake hand sliding out over the bed expecting to hit warm flesh, his drowsy stare expecting to see half lidded eyes above a slow smile on the soft pillows.

To say that he hated it seemed redundant and oversimplified, but he did. He *hated it*.

And he wished his best friends weren't all embroiled in it. Even as Catherine poked her head around the door and told Will that Frank was ready to be seen, he couldn't help but smile derisively. 'Best friend'.

You're supposed to be my anchor, Will had said harshly.

I am, Hannibal replied.

In the end he kept his mouth shut because he was worried, if he opened it, something irrevocable would slip out. For better or for worse. He kept his eyes on the door and heard Alana's shoes

crunching in the dirt and stones as she shuffled on them.

“Well,” she sounded hurt, unimpressed and sympathetic all at once, “when you feel the need to start talking about what happened to you, instead of hiding behind small talk and doing your best impression of a mute, you know where I am.”

Will looked down, a slow sigh on his lips as Alana walked off, Applesauce trotting beside her. He looked at Frank who stared up at him. Will felt like an asshole when she simply let out a groaning whine and looked away. *Fuck*, he thought viscerally as he heard Alana open the boot for her dog to jump inside. He watched her drive away without another glance in his direction.

Will picked up Frank’s leash and led the dog inside. He busied himself with his appointment, only half listening to the list of ailments she would need treated, *malnutrition needed special food for bulking up, wound at the tail that needed cleaning and stitches, and...*

“...she’s pregnant.”

“What?” that had pulled Will out of his daze; he looked to Dr. Theo with a lost stare.

“I said she’s pregnant, Will,” Theo looked delighted, “heavily. I’m surprised you didn’t notice.”

“I thought it might be peritonitis,” Will shrugged helplessly, “Lenny had peritonitis when I picked him up. Looked like he’d eaten a balloon.”

“No, it’s definitely not that. She’s actually pretty healthy other than needing a damn good feeding and a patch up,” Theo said, as he carefully felt along her belly with his gloved fingers, “I’d say maybe...a couple of weeks and she’ll be ready. I can take her for an ultrasound but it’ll add to the bill. Honestly I don’t think you need it. I’ve seen enough pregnant bitches to give you a rough estimate of say, oh, a litter of seven or eight? So if you’re giving her flea treatment use Frontline, the spray is good. Not Advantage, it’s pretty heavy on the chemicals.”

“Alright,” Will nodded, “ok. Thanks.”

“Don’t look so down, Will,” Theo said with a broad smile, showing his slightly crooked teeth as he stood up from his crouch, “your pack just got a little cosier, that’s all.”

“Yeah,” Will sighed, rubbing his face with his left hand while he stroked Frank’s head with his right, “I guess you’re right.”

So far Freddie had been surprisingly cagey on the topic of Will Graham, especially considering he was hot news. Will wondered if Jack had anything to do with the lull. He could imagine an embargo would have been backed by the higher ups too. Will’s incarceration by the Chesapeake Ripper was an embarrassing blight on their record, just as Miriam Lass’s disappearance had been years before.

Only now it seemed the temptation was too high and Freddie had gone ahead regardless. The only reason he’d known it was coming at all had been the slew of emails she had sent him begging and cajoling for an exclusive interview. He hadn’t even refused, instead just ignoring the correspondence altogether. Now, as he read the petty words, he wished he’d given in.

Serial Killer Specialist Becomes Victim of his own Profession

No doubt my faithful readers are up to date with their news bulletins and are aware of the recovery of the BAU's most wanted: Will Graham – the psycho psychic. Abducted on the evening of April 13th, Graham was the second to join the list of missing, but not confirmed dead, victims of the Chesapeake Ripper along with Miriam Lass, a trainee under Jack Crawford (BAU Chief). This faux pas on Crawford's part speaks volumes as to his continued mystification by the Ripper until the surprise demise of Maryland's number one most wanted on October 1st.

The FBI press releases state that Graham has amnesia, unable to remember why or how he was able to ferret out the Ripper's identity, but this humble reporter wants to delve deeper, to bring you the truth. Should we be relieved that Graham was found, or should we be wary of the return of the man capable of doing what the FBI has been unable to for two and a half years?

Specialists involved in Graham's care after his recovery told this reporter, "His physical state is remarkably healthy. If I didn't know any better I would have thought he'd been bed bound for only a few weeks, not months". A further doctor commented that he was amazed at the speed with which Graham had recovered his cognitive abilities and control over his body, "normally it takes weeks just to understand the transition back into normal life. Will has a drive I've never seen before in any other patient who's been under that long".

(Underneath was a photograph, obviously taken discreetly, of Will lying prostrate and unconscious in his hospital bed.)

Words that speak of the medical abilities of the Ripper? Or an un-investigated hunch that speaks of Will Graham's 'amnesia' being a convenient story? Was Graham truly kept in a medically induced coma for just over five months or did he and the Ripper have an arrangement that no one but he and the now deceased Donald Sutcliffe know of? Keep your eyes on the instalments, fellow Tattlers, as this mystery unfolds.

Will drew in a long breath, closed his eyes and let it out as a silent sigh. How the hell did she get people to talk to her? Will knew he hadn't exactly endeared himself to the staff at the hospital but he was sure they were professional enough not to gossip about patients. Probably told them she was a concerned relative or something, he thought wryly. It always seemed such a waste to him when he thought about it for any length of time; Freddie was sharp, he hated to admit it. If she put her mind to tracking down killers instead of corresponding with them to make a quick buck, then the world might be a safer place.

On the way to Chilton's office he stopped by the pet store and spent half an hour deciding what he needed to buy and what he was able to mock up at home. His car was laden by the time he drew up before the stately front of the Asylum.

Negotiating the stairs and the large, ornate doorway ended up being the most unpleasant moments of his visit. Not that he found the rest of his time there delightful, just that he was already resigned to Chilton having something up his sleeve before he even arrived. So when the man welcomed him into his office and offered him a seat, he wasn't surprised by what came out of the man's mouth.

"I can help you, Will."

"Who says I need help?"

“A little bird at the FBI tells me you’re being investigated for inappropriate behaviour in the classroom.”

“Please don’t make me sound like a sex offender,” Will raised a sardonic brow.

“Well, there’s certainly room for improvement in your curriculum. An inability to readjust to the social order? Projecting traumas onto others? You’re exhibiting signs of an inability to cope with the return to normal life.”

“And apparently you should know. Which are you going to pick, Fred?” Will asked with a smile that didn’t reach his eyes, “PTSD? Stockholm syndrome?”

“If you’ll let me help we won’t need to pick a dysfunction so very arbitrarily.”

“I’m not here to be analysed by you.”

“Perhaps you should be,” Chilton said, leaning back in his chair, one hand on his desk, the other playing with a pen, “we’re woefully short of material on your sort of thing. You’re well talked about in my area.”

“Oh? What do they say about me?”

“Too many mirror neurons. Supposed to help us socialise and then go away, but you’ve held onto yours. Makes interacting with people difficult.”

“It’s a mild form of echopraxia,” Will said, tipping his head and keeping behind his glasses.

“Yes, I know,” Chilton looked conceited, “I can only imagine what something like that does to someone who imagines killing people for a living. Mix that with your being an eideteker and your personality must become a rogue’s gallery of misfits. Is it difficult to shake off the shadows?” Will bit at the inside of his lip and considered telling Chilton he could give him a demonstration if he liked; he held back, refusing to give in to the bait, “I have to ask, during intense conversations, do you take on the other person’s speech patterns?”

Will didn’t answer, this time not because he was exercising restraint, but instead because the words were prickly. They stung him. He sat, tapping his fingers on the arm of his chair. A flash of memory, *standing in Chilton’s office, absorbed in a man absent from the proceedings. Hannibal’s lilt said in his tone, Hannibal’s gestures shown through his hands.* Odd, he thought, how some of the happiest spaces in his mind were now transfigured to the basest.

“Did you have a good reason for asking me here?” he asked, rubbing at his face.

“Something I’ve developed which I think you might be interested in,” Chilton said, looking happy to have disquieted Will, “I call it IA-RMT.”

“Does it stand for I’m a really massive twat?”

“Incipient Access Recovered-memory therapy,” Chilton said each word slowly and tightly through clenched teeth, “and I’d rather you were more appreciative. I have no obligation to offer this to you, and between the two of us I am not the one on suspension.”

“On review,” Will clarified, “and what in the hell makes you think I want, for one, my memories back, or two, you in my head unsupervised. I’ve heard of RMT therapies, they’re controversial for

a reason. Didn't you learn your lesson with Gideon?"

"I should hope so," Chilton said, seething beneath his calm exterior, "he's back in my care after all."

"Well you must have a lot to talk about," Will said facetiously, sitting up and reaching for his crutches.

"Not as much as we would have to talk about if you'd just let me help you..."

"Yeah, you can help me alright. Get the door."

To say he left on a sour note would have been rather an understatement. Will hadn't been blind to the undercurrent of desperation in Chilton's tone. He wondered why the man was so fractious then, as he approached the exit, reminded himself that he didn't care.

The door was just as obstinate on the way out as it had been on the way in. Will tried to shuffle his crutches further back under his armpits and lean forwards on the balls of his feet, hand grasping for the long, vertical handle.

"Here, lemme get that for you."

Will looked over his right shoulder to find a vaguely familiar man reaching towards the door, so close that Will was amazed he hadn't heard him approach. He jerked back from the proximity, his left crutch slipping. Will felt his ankle give way as he tried to lock his leg to stop himself from falling. His breath stopped as he felt himself slip, then stuck in his throat as a strong, wiry arm wound around his back and held him steady. His crutches clattered to the ground, echoing, and Will was forced to grab a handful of white material with his left hand, his right tight around the door handle. A lithe chest pressed against his side, sinewy muscles apparent through the thin material of his orderly uniform.

"Whoa there," the voice was familiar now too, tainted with a smile; Will kept his eyes averted from the face, so close he thought he could feel warm breath against his cheek, "didn't mean to startle you. Just hold on," Will leaned forwards and grabbed the other door handle, "I'll get these."

The first crutch slipped up under his right arm and Will leaned heavily on it, facing the door, eyes trained on the fancy filigree around the door handles, until the left one appeared. He let out a breath he hadn't been aware he was holding and stepped cagily back. He watched as the door was opened. It was a quick glance, nothing but a flick of eyes up then down, but enough for Will to remember him. *Short black hair: thin lips and a high forehead: cold eyes*. The orderly who'd spoken to Jack beside the ambulance as Lawrence Wells was loaded inside and Will sat shaking on the steps to the asylum. Will felt the need to back off to higher ground.

In the end he managed to grind out a "Thank you," before the man walked around and held open the door for him.

"No problem Mr. Graham," the man said as he left, careful on the stairs, "you drive safe now."

He had to be careful not to trip, hurrying as he was down the stairs. Part of him had wanted to ask how the hell the man knew his name, while the other was more interested in why his instincts were flaring like claxons, his heart hammering in his chest even as his face remained set, irate. *Don't touch me, don't fucking touch me!* Will almost bit through his lip at the memory: unable to move, a

hand against his collarbone, a kiss against his cheek. The steady beeping of a machine in time with his heart.

When the phone rang he answered it just to stop the sound, uncaring of who was on the other end.

“What?” he bit out.

“Well, at least I am certain I haven’t gone to voicemail.”

I should have checked, Will thought as he closed his eyes, leaning against the car. Trying to slow his heartbeat seemed a pointless exercise now. The wind rustled the tall trees lining the car park, sending a blizzard of yellow and red leaves down across his car, one catching in his hair. Will shook his head roughly, finally managing to speak.

“What do you want Hannibal?” he couldn’t stop the tightness in his voice as he dug around for his car keys.

“I merely wish to talk...”

“I’m hanging up.”

“As you wish.”

The phone seemed to stare at him as he looked down at it, with the same calm resoluteness Hannibal displayed at all times. His finger hovered over the button for all of five seconds before he let out a sound of disgust and lifted the phone back to his ear.

“I do believe you have not hung up, Will.”

“No shit,” Will said sourly, “you’ll just call me back. I know you. Tell me what you want so we can get this over with.”

“Unfortunate phrasing on your part,” Hannibal sounded calm and controlled; Will imagined slamming his perfectly groomed head in a door and felt a little better, “being ‘over with’ would preclude my phoning you at all.”

“Get to the point,” Will bit out, hating that his hand shook as he tried to unlock the car door.

“Very well. Alana tells me you are still using crutches. I wondered if I might suggest a course of physical therapy that will speed your recovery.”

“Oh so now you give a crap about how I’m feeling,” Will said, face squishing into a derisive smile, “that’s cute Hannibal, real cute.”

“Still so very obstinate.”

“Don’t patronise me,” he said in irritation, “I don’t have time for it.”

“It is the time wasted for your rose that makes your rose so important.”

“My father taught me years ago not to believe my own bullshit,” Will said, “don’t think I’m going to start believing yours.”

“I was thinking of hydrotherapy,” Hannibal walked over him and Will bristled, “builds strength while reliving the strain which can cause injury in atrophied musculature. It would suit you perfectly.”

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re a son of a bitch?” he said bluntly, savouring every word.

“No one still living,” he could hear the smile in Hannibal’s voice, “so, when are you available?”

“Just give me the details of whoever you have and I’ll set it up myself,” Will moved on his feet, his legs beginning to ache.

“Not necessary,” Hannibal said, “how about tomorrow at three? The Royal Sonesta court health club. ”

“Will it get you off my back?”

“That depends.”

“Christ, *alright*. Just...just stop phoning me.”

The drive home was arduous not because of his waning physical ability to push down on the gas, but because he realised that, out of all the people demanding a piece of him, Jack, Purnell, Freddie, Chilton, he’d given in to the one man he promised himself he wouldn’t dare to trust again.

Assertif Demandant, Assertif Affirmant

Chapter Notes

> Welcome to the beast that wouldn't die. This chapter quickly got really out of hand, apologies in advance for the double length but I couldn't find a natural break. Also there was supposed to be a lot more in this chapter but, because it rolled on so long, certain things have been postponed (so Bella, Bedelia and Freddie will have to wait till next time I'm afraid). And as for those waiting for beginning of the kinkier fare...I hope you can wait until the end.
>
> Title translation: "Ask, Tell"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘You see them. The holes in your mind? You see them, sweet thing. You see them cause they ain’t holes to you. They’re treasure hoards, right? Places to keep the gritty thoughts. You put yourself in there and hide it away, lock and key. But now you got holes, *real* holes.And it terrifies you, don’t it. That you can’t remember what he was or why he was, or what he did to you. You don’t remember laying eyes on his face but you remember having done it cause *deep down inside* you can feel that drop in your stomach. The one like going up over a speed bump with your foot too hard on the gas. You saw his face and it made you wanna curl up and forget. Jolt you out of your happy ignorance, does it? Or did you ever have ‘ignorance’? You wouldn’t, would you. Always know everything that’s going on an’ why it’s happening. Well, then does it keep you guessing? He liked you, liked you *a lot*. Oh who’re we kidding here, he *likes* you a lot. You worry that he might’ve killed for you. That boy with his tongue cut out and his blood leaking onto the books, something for you right? Might do it again too. Ha! You should see your face. And that’s just the start of it, don’t pretend to me. You’ve seen it, you *imagine* it, what he did, and it makes your heart beat like a virgin on her first date. Sliding his hands over you like you’re his property. Who knows? With how much you think about him maybe he *does* own you. Imagined him fucking you yet? I know you have. Ain’t got a face but you’ve imagined it. You’re the only hunter I ever knew who stank of prey. Luring them in with your own bait, that’s precious. You’re a precious little secret, ain’t you Will? You see it, you see...’

He woke to the sound of geese flying over the house, his own rasping breaths and the remnants of Garrett Jacob Hobbs’ whispering voice. The voice and its words were enough to keep him lying on the mattress beneath the rumpled duvet watching the sun travel the sky, so numb that he didn’t have the energy to be angry at the empty side of the bed. It was becoming too tiring to keep it up.

It was nine o’clock before he managed to force himself from the malaise he’d slipped into. He got up and moved around the kitchen by rote; dog food, open front door for scuffling paws, coffee, toast, couch, turn on the news.

*Headless Bodies Found in Vineyard, Georgia – Katie Gideon reports...*Read the text scrawl along the bottom of the screen.

Another reminder. Only this one wasn’t as prickly as his dreams were. This one spoke of fitting back in to well worn grooves where at least he knew he fitted in. Will stared at the television screen

and laced his fingers together, bringing them to his mouth. *A diversion, a welcome, welcome diversion. Lose yourself for a little while? You should. You deserve it.*

Two men this time, if the reporter was to be believed, standing at the scene as the bodies were wheeled out through the rain dimmed green of the vineyard to the waiting fleet of SUVs, ambulances and police cruisers. Lot of good an ambulance is going to do a headless man, Will thought as he watched the rain beat against the reporter, trussed up in a waterproof jacket.

He closed his eyes and tried to bring to mind the photographs Beverly had brought him, smelling faintly of evidence-box cardboard. The memory was tinted white with hospital glare. It appeared as vivid images overlaid with words. The first target had seemed random, a blitz attack; man in a car park next to his vehicle. *Anger and hatred in the jagged flesh across his empty neck.* The second had blown that theory from the water. It had taken planning, motive against the victim. A woman in her home, placed carefully on the couch, *a gentle hand in the clean slice at the neck and the careful placement of the body, redressed for modesty's sake,* with her husband dead upstairs, throat slit from side to side, severe bruising on the body that showed he was beaten before death, *again that rage in the ragged gash, hate and hate and hate...*

Will opened his eyes and blinked. Deep breath, fingers pulled apart with difficulty when he realised he was crushing them too tightly. Now two more. He frowned. It wasn't enough.

The phone rang three times before it was answered. Will knew Beverly was still at the scene because of the beating sound of rain against an umbrella loud in his ear.

"Kind of a bad time," she said by way of greeting.

"I can see that. Actually I think I can see you. Red and black jacket?"

"Lemme guess. Katie Gideon, news reporter extraordinaire?"

"What can I say? She looks great in a mac."

"I can't believe this is what you do with your days off. No, wait. I take that back."

"I have a couple of questions. Mind filling me in?"

"Sure," she said, "I'm just going to get under the trees. Hang on."

The loud thumping stopped, replaced by the airy sound of a slight wind. He heard the rustle as Beverly shook out her umbrella.

"The one time I get to come to Georgia and it's tipping biblical proportions of rain," she said as she brought the phone back to her ear.

"Don't worry, you look great in a mac too."

"You better believe it," he heard the grin in her voice, "You were right, you know. This one was even more staged than the last."

"Tell me."

"Two men, late thirty to forty best guess from what's left of them. Headless, both this time. We found one sat against a rock in the vineyard, arms folded closed across his chest."

“Like at a funeral home?”

“Yeah, just like that. Redressed again, in clothes far too big for him. The other, not so much. Dumped in the barn where they do the wine pressing, *in* one of the wine presses. Not sure the owners are going to want to use it again.”

A rock and a wine press. Something there rang a bell but it was faint. Will scratched at his face and wished he could be standing in the deluge with them. He needed to see. *The smell of fresh rain was heavy. Cleansing. It rinsed the blood from sight. A flood to wash away all sins and anger that man could wrought upon the other. Two heads taken to appease God.*

“Will?”

“Sorry,” he cleared his throat, “I was thinking.”

“Get anything out of it?”

“No, but...give me a second.”

He was too deep down now to care that it wasn’t appropriate; he put her on hold and quickly dialled the familiar number. It rang once and a half before it was answered.

“Good afternoon Will. Are you calling to cancel your appointment?”

“No,” Will said, refusing to hesitate even as he rolled the word out of his mouth awkwardly, “Do a rock a winepress and decapitation mean anything to you?”

“It’s what I love about our conversations,” Hannibal said, “they are never dull.”

“If you don’t then...”

“Can you give me anything more to go on? Only each article is rather incongruous when taken in turn.”

“I’m thinking bible.”

“Mmm,” a familiar hum that spoke of concentration; Will could see him in his mind’s eye, staring straight ahead, almost sightless, eyes partly narrowed into the middle distance, “yes. The book of Judges if I’m not mistaken. The princes of the Midianites were slain upon a rock and a winepress. Their heads taken.”

“Yeah,” Will nodded though no one could see, “that’s it. For revenge?”

“For freedom, if I remember correctly.”

“You always do.”

“Well, this is uncommonly civil.”

“Don’t ruin it.”

“I will see you soon.”

A rush of antagonistic realisation nagged at him. One that bit harder because he'd known already, on some level, that he was trying to ignore it. I'm not going to meet a therapist at the pool, Will thought irately, am I. *But you'll go anyway.* Will bit at the inside of his lip and quickly reconnected with Beverly.

"Sorry I was so long. It's from the bible. Book of Judges. We're looking for someone with a working knowledge of Christian doctrine."

"In Georgia? Well that's going to narrow it down."

"At least it's something."

"Yeah, it is. Ignore me. The rain makes me cranky."

A pause. Will imagined the scene and knew he was making it worse than it needed to be. *Ripped muscle open to the air as the headless corpse was pushed down into the press. Mutilated beyond simple decapitation.*

"It was brutal, wasn't it," he knew Beverly understood it wasn't a question.

This escalation in the kill was leading somewhere, Will could see it in the brutality as it increased, the location and the staging as it became more daring and more militant. Personal, so very *personal*. There was reason to the madness, even if it was still nothing but madness.

"Yeah, it was. Took his hands this time too. And his genitals. Still haven't found those. The hands were stuck on the gate posts, palms up. Cuts on the body were more rips than anything. Brian thinks they might be using a bone saw. Oh and he was naked."

"They? What do you mean they?"

"Jack thinks it's a double act. The kills are so diverse, one caring, one raging."

"No," Will said without hesitation.

"Really?"

"Yes, really. If it were two the more dominant would be imposing himself onto the other kill. The submissive would only be able to mop up what was left if they wanted to care for the bodies. And why only ever care for one of them if it was a partner with the vendetta? He's purely animalistic, the dominant, it's vicious how he kills them."

"You think this is just one guy? Then why such different M.O.'s?"

Why so different*?* Because he was doing this for a reason. The reason was righteous now but had been born out of shame and fear. That was why he took their heads, wasn't it? He didn't want them to live in the same indignity that he did. The dominant personality scared the submissive. It rebelled against him. Something had happened to him, something terrible. He was lashing out. Had been too weak to pick up the knife himself, he needed help. Motivation.

"I think he's humiliating one and saving the other," Will explained as the slots clicked together in his mind, "That amount of anger isn't contained, it's *released*. He doesn't seem like the type to share. The submissive personality is completely opposed. Like a negative. I don't think the first would tolerate the second without it being impossible not to."

“Then you think he has..?” Beverly stopped suddenly and Will frowned.

It went quiet enough that he checked his phone to make sure he hadn’t been disconnected, then:

“You do phone consults now?”

“Hi Jack,” Will said, rubbing his face with a tired hand.

“You know I shouldn’t be letting you anywhere near this crime scene, what with the review board breathing down my neck.”

“No one even has to know I was there,” Will said, “mainly because I wasn’t.”

“Just in your head?” Jack asked wryly.

“Just in my head. Do you want what I’ve got or don’t you?”

Hesitation. Will waited.

“I’ll take what I can get,” Jack sounded wary but resigned.

“It’s not two killers, it’s one.”

“How’d you figure?”

“Because I think they’re two sides of the same motive,” he said, “he believes he’s two angels, Jack: mercy and wrath. Wrath allows mercy to save one while avenging himself on the other. The wife in the second kill, she had old scarring, bruising, right?”

“We’re pretty sure it was domestic violence,” Jack conceded.

“It’s all connected back,” Will said, almost as if to himself, *remembering,* “something happened to him.”

The man with the slit throat had been badly beaten, and not just in the conventional places. *Photographs: a face scarred blue and purple, lacerations on the face without time to scab, blood half coagulated over bulging puff-eyes. Torso a patchwork of half formed punch-welts, legs pock marked with kicks. And in between his legs, his genitals purple and swollen with blood under tight skin, disfigured and bent, one testicle popped open and unravelled from sheer brutal force.* The mutilation of the genitalia in the most recent double wasn’t coincidence. Will didn’t believe in coincidences.

“I think...I think you’re going to find signs of sexual abuse on the guy in the wine press, pre-mortem.”

“Think this was a revenge?”

“A bid for freedom.”

“What?”

“I think he might have been abused as a kid, or may be a victim of rape.”

“A bit of a jump.”

“He took his hands and his genitals, Jack,” Will said, “after the head they’re the part he finds most offensive.”

“Well, if it is rape then that’ll be harder to track,” Jack sighed, refusing to argue, “not many men report it.”

“And if it’s child abuse then you need to go back to the first kill and look closer at the guy in the parking lot. Children are more likely to be abused by people they know, and a killer’s first tends to be someone they’re familiar with. The first pair will be the key.”

“There was only one victim in the first,” Jack argued.

“Then you’re missing a body,” Will said, “and I think it’s because he’s ashamed of it. It was someone important to him.”

“Beverly’s right isn’t she,” Jack said incongruously, making Will frown.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“This is what you do with your days off.”

Like a train derailed, everything fell through the air before landing. In that moment before the wheels leaving the tracks and the debris hitting the ground, that was where Will Graham found himself. Hanging in weightlessness, a soft limbo where reality seemed suspended just below him. He could see it, waiting for him to hit. Bright, sandy ground already dented with flotsam and jetsam, smoking and baking in the heat of the destruction. The train had jumped the tracks long ago but he’d never even felt the judder, never registered the screaming of metal or the cries of the passengers.

Jumping town to town, job to job, until he found one he could be ignored in but still make a difference. *The FBI with its righteous fury and commanding respect, harbouring him like a fugitive from the rest of the world*. Filled his home full of wandering paws because it fooled him into thinking it was enough to not need more than that. *Enough clacking claws and he could fool his social senses into thinking of them as footsteps.* Fill his head with murder and violence so he could use them as a coverall when the darker thoughts slipped through and leaked out like poison into a water supply, *you’re just reflecting*, and not have to admit that he was so close to being a case himself that he sometimes became buried in the bottle just to ignore it, *of all the times he’d imagined killing with his own hands he could name fifty times he’d imagined killing with another’s.*

And now, after everything that had happened, Will found himself back in the same routine. Only everything wasn’t the same. Everything was different now. He just couldn’t fall back to his old life without always remembering what he’d almost had. The soft smile and gentle hands had ruined him far more than he’d thought he’d ever allow.

“Actually I have to go,” Will said softly, “I, uh, have somewhere I need to be soon.”

“Ok, well I can call you if we find anything new,” Jack said, “or confirm any of your suspicions.”

“Mmm,” Will hummed before hanging up.

He sat on the couch, looking at the muted television as the news headlines switched, colours flashed. He wondered when he'd become so unstuck, so unable to imagine himself being alone for the rest of his life. Before it had been easy. Now...

It wasn't his sort of place. Will should have known, or suspected, that Hannibal would suggest somewhere Will would feel uncomfortable. He had parked his old Volvo between a BMW and a Mercedes, hidden within a further slew of exotic European cars. It was ingrained into him to distrust gaudy shows of wealth. None were so present as at an elitist health club, he thought derisively as he navigated his way to the classical frontage, sporting brass plaques and immaculately bedecked doormen.

The lush lobby seemed to judge him as he limped in, all marble floors and tall pillars beneath the high, ornamented ceiling. His duffel bag thumped against his side with every arcing step. The concierge welcomed him politely, a young man with courtesy trained into him as if by a whip; blonde hair perfectly cropped over a face drawn thin.

"Just take the elevator to the top floor, sir," he said, voice high and strict, hands wringing each other almost out of sight beneath the busy countertop, a twitch at his left eye; Will knew the signs. He wondered how long it would be before the man had a complete nervous breakdown, "they're through the doors at the back there."

"Would you mind..?" Will asked frankly, indicating to his crutches.

"Of course," the man didn't react beyond that, accompanying Will to the door, his walk stiff.

Will thought he seemed glad to be away from his post; so much so that he accompanied Will to the elevator, called it and stepped inside when it arrived. Will watched the floors flit past in winking lights. Two floors from the top he could no longer stand the concierge's well shined heels bouncing on the elevator floor.

"Prozac or Sarafem?"

The young man threw a glance over his shoulder which smacked of insulted embarrassment. Will didn't have the energy to care.

"Let me guess," he said, "your legs are stiff, you've been drinking a lot of water and you've been having trouble in the bedroom."

"How did you..?" the man's voice wobbled out as the doors dinged open.

"My advice? Stop taking it," Will said, not looking at him as he spoke.

His eyes were on the smoothly revealed landscape of glass, floor to ceiling, wall to wall. A window out onto the sky; high, white clouds palate-scraped across deep blue. The silhouette of a man there; a hole in the spectacle which pulled in the light as if he had lived all his days in the shadow.

He approached steadily, his left ankle still particularly sore from his almost-fall the day before.

"I would say this is rather more than fashionably late."

“Sorry, I was busy,” he said softly; the car journey had given him time to both remember his resentment, try and forget it and then, eventually, become resigned to it.

“Making new friends? I did not know it was polite to offer medical consults in elevators.”

Hannibal did not turn to ask his question. Things had gone beyond the need to look at each other to understand how the face was pulled and contorted as he spoke. Staring out at the vestiges of the day Will refused to look down. Looking straight ahead he could believe he was anywhere he wished.

“I don’t make friends,” Will said, leaning heavily on his crutches and wincing at the pain in his shoulders.

“You make acquaintances?”

“Impressions.”

“That must be tiring.”

“Not as tiring as being lied to.”

“I did not lie,” Hannibal said, shifting his black clad form minutely towards him, “I offered you something to help you get better. I did not say someone else would be involved.”

“Lying by omission,” Will shrugged, “it still counts.”

“If you do not wish to accept my help you just need to say.”

“Don’t play the passive aggressive card,” Will sighed; the night before had drawn and quartered him with dreams of delusional wastelands, writhing with red dripping milky eyes and rabid thoughts; now the day had welcomed him with decapitated corpses. He was too exhausted to be angry, “anyway, it’s Thursday. What happened to your two till five slot?”

“I cut my caseload drastically not long after you were taken,” Hannibal admitted, “it was...taxing. I dislike giving advice when I’m only able to offer half an ear.”

“I suppose I should thank you for that,” Will said, unable to stop the begrudging tone, “without your help I’d still be in that cottage just...wasting away.”

“Not necessary,” Hannibal said; definitely smiling now, Will thought, “I feel responsible.”

“Oh?”

“I introduced you to Donald,” Hannibal said, “and I allowed his deceit to put you at such risk that, should it have progressed further than it did, I might have lost you altogether.”

“You did lose me altogether,” Will said, tone shutting down, “turns out you didn’t need any help but your own for that.”

A group of seagulls appeared, floating on the warm wind currents. There was nothing left to say and Will was more than aware that he’d stabbed the conversation in the back. An abrasive caw filtered muffled through the glass. As if mocking them for their flightless arms the gulls danced on the ethereal before sweeping down. When Will’s eyes followed them he was greeted with the dirty

grey and brown landscape of reality. It stole the last of the wonder he'd been clinging to, leaving him once more sagging and tired.

"Shall we?"

"I suppose I came all this way," Will murmured, "might as well."

Refusing to react was almost as rewarding as an angry, raging shout. He found catharsis in keeping the walls up, rebuffing any chances Hannibal might have had to make Will smile or frown or raise his eyebrows in surprise or even simply look at him with that subtle understanding they'd both shared. Still did, Will knew as he changed awkwardly in a stall, leaving it locked despite knowing no one would come in. It wasn't pleasant but then he knew Hannibal hadn't designed it to be pleasant. He'd designed it to get a reaction, one that Will wasn't willing to give him the satisfaction of.

The pool was small but big enough for them alone, starting at a sloping tiled floor down into the clear, under-lit waters until it became deep enough to swim. Hannibal helped him down, the water lapping against his feet, then ankles, then calves, warm and pleasant. Their touch was close, naked flesh against flesh, but no intimacy was shared. Will wouldn't allow it.

"I didn't know you did hydrotherapy," Will said as the water rose to his chest and he hesitantly chanced taking his wobbly feet from the base of the pool, bobbing gently as he swished his arms back and forth.

"I don't. Although I am perfectly capable."

"Figures. I don't know why I took you up on this in the first place. No, actually I do. Stupid really. I need to be more careful."

"Turn around and put out your arms," Hannibal instructed, ignoring him.

"Is it safe to put my back to you?" he asked sarcastically.

"As safe as expecting me to stop you from drowning."

"Wonderful."

Regardless of the hollow feeling he clung to, Hannibal was true to his word. Will couldn't say he felt entirely at ease with Hannibal constantly out of his sight, not completely, but the man was gentle and considerate, his large palms raised flat against Will's shoulder blades, holding him steady. Will could feel the water displaced behind him as he kicked his legs, moving them both back through the warm embrace.

After ten laps he could feel the strain in his legs. A sound of discomfort brought them to a halt. Will only knew Hannibal had stopped when he drifted into him, bumping his head lightly against the man's sternum. He righted himself easily, enjoying the freedom the water afforded him, and turned to look at Lecter. The man reached out to take Will's hands and hold him steady. Will gripped him tightly.

"You need to tell me when it becomes too much," Hannibal said.

"I can do more," Will protested.

“A little for a lot, Will. Do not overexert or this will be pointless.”

“And if I don’t push myself I’ll be on crutches until Christmas.”

“The point of this exercise is not to break you.”

A sharp glance. Will wasn’t able to stop the words.

“Are you sure?”

At first there was no reaction. Then a smile began. For Hannibal a smile did not simply happen, it always *began*. This one filtered up firstly with the vague curl at the mouth’s edge, next registering in slim cheeks as a twitch, then up, tilting the mouth further, pulling his cupids bow wide and delineating the deep lines that ran between his nose and the corners of his lips; eventually the small trio of wrinkles by his eyes padded out like a crow’s foot in the sand. Will swallowed and looked down at the rippling light on the surface of the water.

“Your arms next I think,” Hannibal said.

It continued as it had started. A vague undercurrent of resentful tension, with Hannibal always touching him somewhere, lightly. Nothing more than a resting of fingers against his biceps, or palms against his chest, or a soft grip on his ankles. On his back, staring up at the ceiling as he kicked his legs, he allowed his ears to slip under the water and the echoing boom of his own heart to overtake the soft shush of water against skin. He closed his eyes, savouring the feeling of being momentarily at peace.

Will only registered that he was aching all over when he looked up to find the clock had ticked past by an hour.

“When do we need to be out by?” he asked as he felt Hannibal let go of his legs and place a hand against his chest, helping him to right himself.

“Another twenty minutes or so. How do you feel?”

“Tired,” Will sighed; *in more ways than one*, he thought.

“Then this seems an appropriate place to stop.”

He gave only a nod in return. Without talking he had been able to imagine himself alone. Now Hannibal was once more here in the pool with him, his hair half dried and half slicked to his skull. His maroon eyes intent. Will fumbled his way to the side of the pool without assistance, his feet bouncing on the bottom, and shuffled himself along to the shallows, his legs trembling with exertion as the pressure upon them increased.

In the end the attempted escape was futile. He was forced to wait for Hannibal to join him, wet hands clasping the damp skin of his left forearm and the sensitive skin of his right hip. Hannibal’s thumb slipped upwards as they walked together slowly around the pool, making Will jerk at the sensation against his side. He did not comment.

“So did you find your executioner?” Lecter asked, gripping tighter as Will stumbled slightly.

“How did you know I was looking?”

“You called to ask me about an obscure biblical passage in relation to decapitation,” Hannibal tipped his head, “it was not exactly a leap of faith.”

“I’m not on a case.”

“I think you appear to be on a case whether you want to be or not. Is it anything to do with the killings in Georgia?”

“You’ve been watching the news in the lobby,” Will said dryly.

“I had to pass the time somehow while I waited for you.”

It was telling, enough for Will to catch it before it ran off without him. A wonderful note of familiarity was singing on the string between them. Will winced at the sweet tone of the vibration and hated the bitter note it turned to as he reached forwards and strangled it into silence.

“Don’t try and draw me in.”

“I bed your pardon?”

“And don’t act coy either,” Will could hear the coldness in his tone.

“I feel it is you who are acting against the natural flow. I thought we were having a delightful time.”

“There’s something wrong with you.”

It had been impossible to put any effort into sounding malicious. They stopped because Hannibal stopped and, without him, Will found he couldn’t keep his balance. Will didn’t mean to, but couldn’t help looking up at the man at his side. Hannibal was staring straight ahead.

“Oh?” he asked blankly.

“Don’t take it as an insult. There’s something wrong with me too.”

“You sound certain,” Hannibal said.

“I am,” Will said as they began to walk once more, “I’m here aren’t I? That’s enough proof for me.”

Dried and dressed, they did not speak. Will sorted the collar of his jacket to sit tightly around his neck, stopping the still wet curls of hair from irritating the skin. He left his glasses off as they began to steam in the balmy air. When he looked up at the mirror Hannibal was standing behind him, eyes trained on his own reflection as he ran the knot smoothly up his tie. It appeared, for a sickening moment, distrustfully domestic. Will made to leave before he worried he wouldn’t be able to, stopped only by Hannibal’s smooth voice.

“Same time next week?”

Will shook his head; he turned to look over his shoulder. Hannibal was watching him in the mirror, hands continuing to untwist and perfect his immaculate shirt, “No, this won’t happen again.”

“You do not believe it will help?”

“Hannibal...”

Will waited until Hannibal turned from the mirror to watch him with his own eyes, not the reflected facsimiles. He was not angry, he was not calm. He tried to remember something he’d been told on his first homicide case, a mother and two kids gunned down on their front porch; *focus on the facts, Graham,* his partner had said as Will stood on the sidewalk, staring, *If you focus on them being facts, you don’t have to think about what they really are*.

Only he’d never been able to follow good advice.

“It’s funny, you know,” he started, sitting down on the bench before the lockers heavily, placing his crutches to the side and clasping his hands, “before this all started I thought...no, you know I didn’t even think. I just did. My life was just a series of doings and not doings. Get up, go to work, sleep, eat, try my very best to avoid people even though that little bit of me wanted desperately just to connect. Never worked, never does,” he waved his hand in the air casually, dropping it back to rest on his knee, “got used to that. Inured. I just...it became easy, being alone. And the worst part?” looking up he caught Hannibal out the corner of his eye, watching him silently, “I think I could have gone on like that until I keeled over from a stroke at fifty, or heart attack at seventy, or went in my sleep. Whichever. I used to think about it a lot when I saw the old guys and gals out at the picture house I used to go to in the Old Quarter. Holding hands at the Sunday matinees. I would let myself get jealous and then I’d drive home with my foot hard on the gas. Get drunk and think about dying alone,” Will looked down at his clasped hands and wished his legs would stop aching.

“And I could imagine it so clearly because I’d had cases before on homicide, some old man in his apartment, stinking out the building because no one had even noticed he was dead until the smell got out. Had to go and make sure he hadn’t been bumped off. Only I knew that smell before I’d even get to the third floor; lonely death. So after a while I...I turned it off. I didn’t let it be a part of my life because I knew I would imagine it every night, *and I did*, being the one on the stained mattress waiting for the state funeral. I kept my head down and I lost myself in my work and I turned up every day and let others into my head so I could ignore myself. It didn’t matter that no one got too close because I kept the line pretty clear. Didn’t let anyone across it. So it didn’t matter, it didn’t *matter,*” he laughed without humour, “when Alana pushed me away because I already *knew* she couldn’t want me. It’d never work out. It never did. It was just part of the flow.”

A pause because he knew it was something he didn’t have to say, even though he wanted to; he cleared his throat and wondered why he was even bothering,

“Then *you*. You,” Will shook his head, “Does it surprise you that I thought we’d hate each other on sight?” he chanced a look at Lecter and found steady eyes regarding him, expression unreadable, “Maybe it doesn’t. Not a lot surprises you. Ha, I thought you were such a pompous egotist, so eager to tell me all about myself as if I didn’t know. Prove how clever you are. I kept so focused on being in my own little bubble and ignoring you trying to pop it, that I didn’t even realise I was in love with you until that day I came to your office after David was murdered. I don’t think I’ve ever been so careless. I like control, I like knowing what’s going to happen and what I can do about it. I like control because it means I don’t get surprises. I don’t have to deal with being yanked into the real world and being given a taste of what it’s like for people that don’t pull their hand away when another person reaches out. Because you understood me, and I don’t think I’ve ever had that before. Stupid, right? I’ve met hundreds of people and you’re the first one to really understand me. Enough to get my defences down and build yourself a bolt hole. I can’t remember a time when I’ve been so carefree with just talking to someone who didn’t shy away when I said something odd, or care that

I can see into the dark places but can't always shake it off when I look away, or didn't mind that I don't always..."

A long, slow breath. Will made himself stop because talking was just forcing himself to stay hanging in that limbo, staring at the ground before the crash. He worked his jaw, straightening his back and wincing as it clicked. There had to be a time when the ground rushed up to meet him. It was inevitable.

"So maybe I was stupid to think it meant something to more than just me, having you and Abigail. I always thought I'd...make a good father, and you and me, we worked together. It was something I'd never given myself because I'd never lost that much control. Never given that much control away. You were good to me and now..." he rubbed at his face and hated the feeling of loss, "now I wish you'd never bothered. I wish you'd just left me where I was and carried on until you realised you were looking for something other than professional curiosity."

"Will..."

"Yeah, alright, I'm bitter about that. I am. But that doesn't change the fact that..." he talked over Lecter, clasped his fingers tighter, "...that I can't see you anymore. Because it's not fair, on either of us, or Alana," he added quickly to make his case seem stronger than it was, "and I need to go back to the way things were or...I don't know. I'll realise how truly awful my life was, and still is. I'll end up quitting, moving to Florida maybe. Fixing boat motors like my dad just to turn up dead in a motor home for three weeks before anyone calls the cops. You know he died not long after I left for good? No, I guess I don't talk about myself much. Anyway, that doesn't matter," he stood up, hauling his duffel bag up with difficulty and swinging it over his shoulder, shaking his head and setting his face derisively, "I guess this was the really long version of goodbye."

"That is not..."

"I'd rather you didn't add a coda," Will's voice was forced, eyes forward as he headed for the doors.

"William..."

"Don't. This was nice, seeing you. But I can't keep it up. I just...enough now ok? Enough."

It was a long journey home, taking rest stops by the side of the road when his legs threatened to give out or cramp up. On his return he was flooded by furry feet and wet tongues. Winston spent an inordinate amount of time sniffing the chlorine scent in his hair. He stayed on the floor beneath padding paws and inquiring noses; it was an easy escape from the anger-come-sadness-come-regret.

A week later the long hallway on the fifth floor that ran the length of the faculty was being re-carpeted. Will stepped his crutches carefully out of the way of workmen, tool boxes, up and over piles of carpet tiles and, eventually managed to turn off into a subsidiary corridor differentiated by a brass plaque at eye level on the wall. Will was coming to detest screwed-in, brass plaques; they spoke of old tradition which valued being permanent.

Thomas Jourdan Ph.D
Professor of Forensic Sciences, Academy Institute
Head of Faculty

He knocked before opening and was greeted by an ante-room with a secretary behind a prim desk. She asked him to wait, so he did, outside on one of the two hard, plastic chairs set into a recess across from a dark, hardwood door. The faculty levels of the Academy Annexe were distinctly more pleasant and archaic than the teacher's quarters, as Will liked to think of his own and his colleagues offices on the third floor.

Eventually he heard voices approaching through the wood. As he stood, retrieving his crutches to keep him steady on legs still sore from his swim four days prior, Will was greeted briefly by an unfortunately familiar face. Heather MacPhillips spared him only a glance, a nod and a *'Mister Graham'* before she walked unhurriedly down the corridor the way Will had come.

"Professor Jourdan is ready for you Mr. Graham," the secretary called out.

Forty three minutes later Will re-emerged, shoulders hunched. Another layer stripped away. Another hoop to jump through. Will wished he had the strength and the savvy to just run. Instead he clung to the last vestiges of his old life and gave in.

"Well, this is certainly a turn up for the books. I would have thought you'd at least try and make it look like you were forced here. I see your words before were nothing more than a *brutum fulmen*."

It had been an ultimatum. Will had taken it not because he was desperate to keep his job but because he was desperate to hold on to something familiar; fearing a loss of all civility and awareness might break him open and let the undesirable leak out. A set of walls were necessary to keep his world in order and, within that, a cage for the things which crawled and reached out their claws and smiled.

So he'd taken the ultimatum: *Psychiatric sessions, three hours a week for six weeks, after which a further review would be issued and a return to work implemented if results were satisfactory.* The only problem being that Will thought it was the biggest load of bullshit he'd ever heard, and that six weeks was going to do jack shit in the way of helping anyone as increasingly depressed, traumatised and detached as he was feeling. He knew what was wrong, he knew what was building like a scream in his chest unable to break free and he knew, *he knew*, that if he let it out into the open air then it would never stop.

He knew that what he wanted was something he couldn't have and, somewhere in his ravaged head, knew that he shouldn't want it at all. He just didn't know *why*, and it was the *why* that was rotting him from the inside out.

"Spare me," Will sighed, unable to sound facetious, "this is going to work out well for both of us. All you need to do is sign off to Professor Jourdan that I've been getting regular therapy and you can have the inside of my head at your disposal."

"That sounds like a very lucrative gesture."

"Don't provoke the hand that feeds, Fred."

“And here I thought I was doing you a favour,” Chilton replied, his smile overly self-satisfied as he led Will along a high roofed, echoing corridor lined on both sides with offset wooden doors.

“Beneficium accipere libertatem est vendere,” Will muttered.

“Mmm, well, regardless,” Chilton hurried on; Will enjoyed the fact that Chilton obviously didn’t understand his words, skipping over a witty retort as he opened the door, “I suppose I can at least take pleasure in knowing that you had nowhere else to run. You would not be here otherwise.”

The room was small, warm and decked in white with a thick band of battleship grey painted strictly through the middle, like a ribbon around a gift box. A single table, laminate wood effect, sat in the centre; atop it a jug of water, two glasses and a digital audio recorder. Two chairs sat facing each other across the chipped surface, bolted to the floor; one plain, the other fitted with heavy duty Velcro straps sitting open and loose upon the arms. On the floor sat two sheets of metal, a foot square, with a hooped chain anchor at the centre of each. The room took on a new, rather chilling slant. Will was ushered inside and felt instantly ill at ease when he looked to his left to find a man in a white orderly’s uniform setting up a bank of monitoring equipment along a low bench placed against the far wall. A blood pressure cuff, a heart monitor, a polygraph machine fitted with a screed of continuous-form paper, a closed box with a latch that looked like it could contain a syringe.

“I hope you don’t mind but I thought it best to have someone here monitoring us, so to speak, for my own safety as much as yours you understand,” Chilton said as he took the chair without cuffs, “Will Graham this is Matthew Brown, one of our orderlies.”

Will stopped his approach to the other chair to find a set of familiar, sharp, brown eyes regarding him. He kept his eyes on Brown’s chin, taking in his face through peripheral vision. The man seemed taller in the small room than he had by the door the few days before, but Will couldn’t tell if it was just an illusion. Thin lips smiled and the eyes held a cool warmth. Will only caught them in passing, unwilling to hold the stare.

“We’ve already met,” Matthew said in a pleasant drawl, “here, let me help you with those.”

Will allowed the man to take his crutches, leaning them against the nearby wall. He stiffened when those same, long fingered hands reached out without permission and took hold of his forearm and elbow, helping him into the chair. Will murmured a ‘thank you’ before blinking rapidly, still able to feel those eyes against his back.

A white sheet of paper was pushed over the table towards him, a pen at its side. He looked up as he pulled it forwards, noting Chilton’s smug countenance.

“What’s this?”

“Just a nicety,” Chilton shrugged, pouring himself a glass of water, “would you like some? It tends to remain very hot here, the boilers for the entire heating system are just through that wall there.”

“No thanks,” Will said absently while he read the starkly printed words carefully, unable to stop the puff of incredulous breath as he read the fifth clause, “volenti non fit injuria? For god’s sakes: ‘No wrong is done to one who consents’. How often do you enjoy putting that on a form someone’s actually willing to sign?”

“I promise you that the procedure is quite safe, you can see here,” Chilton reached over to point at the seventh clause, “that it has been clinically tested. Seven month period, seventy eight volunteers, three control groups. Minimal fallout. I ran the data myself. It’s been tested.”

“But not approved,” Will amended the unsaid.

“Then see yourself as a pioneer, Mr Graham,” Chilton said, sitting back and clasping his hands, “there are few who would take the risk to give vital data for crucial research.”

“God, you know I’m going to be here for six weeks, the least you could do is cut the crap,” Will finished inspecting the form and signed it with his messy signature, “I don’t need to add terminal ennui to my list of neuroses.”

“I assure you this will be most interesting,” Chilton did not seem put off by Will’s prickly attitude, “just a little set up and we can begin. Do you have any questions?” Chilton asked as he signalled to Brown.

“No but I have a request,” Will said.

“Could you roll up your sleeve, please?” Brown asked him as he stood with the blood pressure cuff.

“No recordings,” Will said as he unbuttoned his shirt cuff and pulled up the soft material, “I don’t want anything on audio, visual. You take the results of the tests, a positive or negative, but you don’t publish details.”

“That’s quite out of the question...” Chilton began, chuffing pompously.

“Then you can find yourself a new guinea pig,” Will said, eyes narrowing, making to roll his sleeve back down, forcing Brown to back off and look to Chilton with raised eyebrows.

The man in question thinned his lips to a line, but when Will looked ready to ask for his crutches he spoke stiffly.

“Alright,” he said, “*alright*. I suppose the results are enough to corroborate my findings. And you have confidentiality, of course, it’s all in the waiver. My lips are sealed. Although I find it interesting that you're so concerned over this. Are we worried something incriminating will creep out?”

“Is that the royal we?” Will laughed, making Chilton’s smirk fade, “Don’t be so portentous. And anyway, I would have thought it all fell under doctor-patient confidentiality.”

“Of course,” Chilton said with a smile that barely reached his cheeks, never mind his eyes.

“Then don’t worry,” Will said as the blood pressure cuff was attached and began to tighten, “I can cooperate when it suits me. But,” he added dryly, “try and pull any of your psychic driving bullshit and you risk having that really ugly tie pin placed somewhere very uncomfortable.”

“Do I need to apply the cuffs, Mr. Graham?” Chilton asked, clearing his throat and trying not to look intimidated.

“Shouldn’t be necessary,” he said as the cuff tightened further, further, became painful, too much, then released with a steady relief that had Will smiling, “as long as we both behave ourselves.”

“Quite,” Chilton agreed tightly.

It had been going smoothly, if Chilton was to be believed afterwards. It had been a bizarre screed of memories to live through, ranging far and wide and showcasing Chilton’s incompetence at keeping Will’s wandering mind from spanning decades instead of months.

‘Keep your rod up, son. Higher than that. You won’t get a bite if the fish can see you a mile off.’

‘Dammit Graham, that’s no way to shoot a gun. I want you back here Friday first thing and I’m gonna have you spelling your name in that silhouette from fifty yards!’

Then everything had gone south. He remembered, afterwards, feeling as if he had been walking along normally and then suddenly taken a step forwards to find nothing under his foot. He had fallen, tumbling weightless down into a place that wasn’t his own.

He pulled at her white dressing gown and she fell to the floor with a scream. Crawling out from under the bed was only natural, gave him better leverage. His hands were shaking, excitement and fear, as he held her down, one hand around her throat and, in the other, the knife he had brought. She stared up at him wild eyed and terrified as he squeezed the life from her, fascinated by the way in which her jet black hair contrasted with her pale skin in the moonlight and her eyes dulled as she passed on. It resisted more than he expected it to, the knife, as it tore up through her cheek, spilling warm, fresh blood out onto the floorboards. He was pleased as the smile was brought out in her face, wide and gaping and utterly perfect.

It had only become apparent to Will that something was wrong when he felt as if his shoulders were being shaken. He looked up from his messy work, annoyed that someone had interrupted him, to find Matthew Brown close behind him, his hands tight around Will’s arms and his mouth moving, voice calm.

“Let go, Will, I need you to let go now.”

Will turned his head back to the front to find his hands in a different place and time. One fisted into Chilton’s shirt, crumpling the fine material, the other wrapped around the man’s throat, gasping lips and choking sounds trembling from above, with Chilton’s own hands tight around his wrists trying desperately to break free. It had taken two whole seconds to shake his head and slip back into being truly horrified at what he saw.

“Jesus,” he said, letting go and almost falling back against Brown, “*jesus*.”

“You alright Boss?” Brown was asking, still holding Will close, as Chilton stood coughing and rubbing at his throat.

“I’ll...” another rough cough and Chilton straightened his tie and shirt unsuccessfully, trying to hide the fear in his eyes and replace it with composure, “I’ll be alright. I just...need some air and to think how this might...how this might affect things. We’ll have to review this set up.”

The door closed behind him with a snap and Will felt the shaking in his arms become an uncontrollable tremor. There were hands against his biceps and he was turned to sit with his legs off

the side of the chair beneath the floating arm and its sinister restraint. Brown was hunkered there, like a gargoyle looming at the corner of a church roof, staring straight at him.

“Hey,” he said, “you’re ok.”

“Don’t touch me,” Will knew he was whispering, barely audible.

“You want some water?”

“I said,” he spoke up, voice shaking, “*don’t-touch-me*.”

Brown looked like he might insist and, truthfully, Will wouldn’t blame him if he wanted to keep hold of his arms just in case. *No control*, he thought, you’ve got *no control*. Look what you did, look what you *damn well did!* Is this what you’ve got hidden up your sleeves at all times? Nothing but open wounds and being so ready to stick your hand inside that you can remember the feel of a wet heat you’ve never even experienced? Brown retreated but didn’t back off, staying squatted down with his hands resting on his knees as he watched Will pull out his phone and try to dial.

“No reception in here,” Brown said as Will cursed, “believe me, I’ve tried.”

“I need to make a phone call,” Will said, hearing a hysterical lilt to his voice and clearing his throat.

“I don’t know,” Brown said, frowning, “you look to me like you need a minute to yourself.”

Will felt like telling him to fuck off and mind his own business. His fingers tried to call a number he knew he shouldn’t even still have under contacts. *Hannibal*, was all it said, sitting incongruously between *Halsey’s Veterinary centre* and *Home.* ‘Hello Will’ he would say calmly, invitingly, and everything would spill out in a rush because he knew Hannibal would understand, he always did.

Even when Will told him goodbye.

“Now I know why you didn’t want the recorder on,” Brown interrupted his thoughts, huffing out a short laugh that made Will frown. He put his phone away and tried to ignore his urgent need for acceptance.

“I was...I was talking?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Brown nodded, “pretty graphic stuff. Did you really do that?”

“No, it’s not mine,” Will mumbled, “do you really think I’d be sitting here if I’d murdered Beth le...” he stopped himself, depersonalising it, “...murdered a woman?”

“I don’t know,” Brown shrugged, his eyes surprisingly open, Will thought, considering who he was sitting alone in a room with, “a lot of people walk around with secrets.”

“I didn’t kill her,” Will muttered, “it’s not mine, the memory. *Christ*,” he closed his eyes and lifted a trembling hand to rub at his face, “this was a...a really bad idea. I need to go.”

“That seems like the bad idea to me,” Brown said frankly, making Will frown.

“I’m sorry, were we just in the same room?” Will asked facetiously.

“Ha, and a sense of humour too,” Brown said as if to himself, rubbing at his jaw and looking to the left, pleased, “you’ll be fine. And anyway, Chilton’s right isn’t he? You wouldn’t be here if you had somewhere better to go.”

“Advice of someone looking to get a handout from his Boss isn’t something I’m inclined to listen to,” Will said nastily.

“Oh, you’re going for the pride there, Mister Graham,” Brown said, looking faux wounded; Will felt his hackles rise as much as his senses fizzed, “but you’ve missed your mark. I don’t care what the Boss wants. I just think you deserve to have a chance.”

“How touching,” Will said acidly, “What do you care?”

“I was given my chance. Still taking it and it’s not done me any harm. You seem like a nice guy. Give yourself a break. Can’t throw it away so soon. Who knows? Maybe you’ll surprise yourself.”

The honesty was surprising. Will couldn’t find a fault in Brown’s candour, his eyes open and sincere. It was refreshing whilst also simultaneously unnerving. Will licked his lips and looked down only to find his hands were no longer shaking. He opened his mouth once, closed, twice, closed. Then he nodded, barely a jerk of his head. Brown stood up and tentatively offered a small, consolatory pat on the shoulder. He left Will sitting alone, eyes staring down at the linoleum, hoping that he wasn’t simply throwing himself into the hole he’d dug.

Three days later his phone rang. Exactly a week since Will had seen him last. That he didn’t pick up, in the end, was inconsequential. The alert came through as he sat on the floor, sanding a long strip of wood with repetitive, powerful strokes. He’d wiped away the sweat beaded on his forehead, sniffed and then sneezed at the wood dust before picking it up.

1 new voicemail.

Persistent if nothing else, Will thought. He put it down and continued sanding.

A week and a half, and three sessions, later Will wasn’t sure where he stood or, half the time, if he was standing at all. It had begun to run a familiar course and he’d fallen into it because Will coveted routines. It was calming; as empowering as it was restrictive. His memories flowed out of his mind just as paper flowed out of the polygraph he had insisted they use. He knew Chilton was glad Will had suggested it, made it easier than trying to force it upon him. Truthfully Will just wanted a little help separating the false memories from the real ones.

When he came round Chilton was always staring at Will’s fingers, wrapped tightly around the ends of the chair’s arm, beneath the heavy restraint of the Velcro cuffs. Will had implemented that further restriction, so as to avoid discomfort. He knew that if he did anything irrevocable it would be difficult to explain as well as live with. This way, no matter how uncomfortable, was best. Chilton had relaxed considerably when Will had done up the first cuff himself and then waited patiently for Matthew Brown to close the second. Brown’s was always tighter.

So far nothing had resurfaced that he could say was truly lost. The only odd memory which he could not place so far being one which was entirely banal and could have come from any time. *Hannibal stood in the doorway, eyes soft but watching him intently. He looked immovable but calm, resting on the balls of his feet. Then there was an overwhelming drop in his stomach and Will's hand went to his pocket.* Then nothing, nothing at all. That was all there was and it was frustrating to know there was more, that something was still missing.

Will was simply glad that, after every session when Chilton stepped outside, Brown spoke to him in his calm drawl which Will was beginning to appreciate. Normally only a few words, or a stilted conversation of two or three exchanges between them. Enough to bring Will back into himself, define his reality as sitting within that small, white and grey-striped box, and not with his hands lifting frozen bodies from the sand or burying them in the forest.

Distracted him from the voicemails sitting in his pocket; a slowly building collection. Will had refused to listen to any of them, for fear that he'd be too weak to resist whatever lay within. It was on the stormy afternoon after the fourth session that things changed.

"Son of a..."

Will stood by his Volvo, unlocking the door, and tried to tell himself he should ignore the muttered curses from behind him, get inside, and drive home. He managed to get the door part way open before he looked up at the grey-cast sky, darkening with a pregnant threat. Will swallowed and looked over his shoulder before pushing away from the car, using his crutches carefully on the gravel. Brown was facing away from him, hands putting his black helmet on the ground and then hunkering down beside his motorcycle, pulling the leather of his pants tight across his thighs.

"Need a hand?"

The eyes were slow to regard him, looking up to squint against the white glare of the clouds. The wind picked up and began tossing the autumn remnants about the car park in a flurry of red, orange and dirty brown.

"If you know someone that can fix it," Brown said, frustration lining his tone beneath the normal platitude as he knocked the gas tank with his knuckles, "I can't afford another call out."

"Actually I do," Will said, pulling eyes back to him, "me."

"You?"

"Mmm."

"...Alright," Brown nodded, eyes flicking down Will before bouncing back up again to his face, "wouldn't have tagged you for it, but hey I won't complain."

Twenty minutes later and the first sign of rain was spitting irregularly from the clouds as Will took the offered hand Matthew held out and was pulled to his feet.

"Try it now," Will said, wiping his hands on a spare rag from his tool box.

Purring like a kitten, Will thought with a small smile as the bike started without a hitch. He leaned to his side, resting on one crutch, and pocketed the rag. Matthew was sat, straddling the saddle, looking up at him with a closed lip smile.

“Well,” he said turning off the engine, “I think you just earned yourself a drink.”

“I...,” Will hesitated, taken by surprise, looking down at the front wheel; unable to think of a good excuse he kept it vague, “I can’t, sorry. I’ve got to get home.”

“That right?”

The words ‘*Another time, maybe*’ had been half formed in his mind when the phone rang in his pocket. Will took a deep breath and smiled politely, reaching for the shrilling device. Not that he needed to look, already eighty percent certain who it was; it was simply vindicating to know Hannibal was still trying to keep contact. Or perhaps just keep himself as a constant in Will’s life even without even being present.

I prefer you as a constant.

As do I.

“Actually, you know what?” Will said, cancelling the call to stop it reaching voicemail; he looked up, pushing down his agitation, catching Matthew’s eye and holding it as best he could, “A drink sounds great.”

“And then what?”

Will handed Beverly her coffee and then went back to hammering the base onto the dog bed he was building. The floor was littered with wood shavings, rolls of yellow foam, a pile of soft, fleece off-cuts and an open toolbox with its contents strewn. The mess was beginning to impinge on Will’s calm, enough that he hadn’t been able to stop building even when Beverly arrived. Thankfully, she didn’t seem to mind.

“And then we had a drink,” Will said, rolling his shoulders to shake out the stiffness.

“So far your story is sorely lacking.”

“You’re the one that asked.”

“No need to get grouchy,” she poked, grinning into her drink as she blew into the cup, “So, are you seeing him again?”

“I didn’t say it was like that. It was just a drink. Why can’t a drink just be friendly?”

“Because a drink is never friendly when the person offering clearly wants in your pants.”

“For crying out loud,” Will muttered under his breath, “it’s not like that.”

“Gees, you’ve been out of the job for a couple of months and already your profiling skills are suffering.”

“If I’d known you were just coming over for a game of insults I would have phoned and saved you the journey.”

“Ha, ha. Actually I just wanted to see how you were doing and, I don’t know, it’s my day off. We could go do normal people things. That’s always a novelty. We could go to the movies or, *oh* go to the mall and just window shop. Come on, we’ll can go experience the banality of pedestrian life and remind ourselves why we keep our awful jobs.”

“Thanks, Bev, but I think my own life has enough banality for the both of us right now.”

“...Did you just call me Bev?”

“Yeah,” Will sighed, catching it too late, “sorry. It’s a bad habit.”

“No, that’s ok. Just wasn’t expecting it. Only my brother ever calls me Bev.”

“Didn’t know you had a brother.”

“Yeah, a big brother. Three years older. Lives in Atlanta running a bakery. It’s called Sweetie Pie. They make amazing brownies.”

“Bet your mom visits him more than you,” Will smiled as he pulled out a roll of thick foam and began cutting it to shape on the floor.

“Ha, you’d like to think that, but I’m a mama’s girl so I get the attention. Plus I’m the one that got engaged. My brother hates when she visits, he always gets the Mom Inquisition. Anyway she loves hearing all about my work. She’s worse than you.”

“Didn’t think that was possible. So did you visit when you were in Georgia?”

“Huh? Oh, no. I don’t like to mix work with family vacation. Doesn’t go down well when you’re sitting round the dinner table and the news coughs up the case you’re on. Makes my brother feel like a third wheel. Or something. Guy’s crazy.”

“Must run in the family.”

“You’re quite the comedian today. Or, wait...you’re not weaselling out of time with me because your new squeeze is coming round are you?”

“How likely does that seem to you?”

“Hey, I work with the unlikely. It tends to jump out and surprise when you’re not expecting it. So I prefer expecting it. Oh *hey*, look who it is, the baby mama.”

Will turned at the sound of clicking claws against the floorboards to find Frank standing in the doorway between the kitchen diner and the living room. She had been walking about, or more waddling about, for hours now, unable to settle. Will could see she was uncomfortable but knew there was nothing that could be done. He reached out slowly and stroked along her sleek fur, scratching at her ruff. She tolerated it for a few seconds before letting out a low whine and walking towards Beverly, who had put down her coffee and squatted down onto the floor, holding out her hands.

“She prefers women,” Will shrugged when Frank sat down heavily beside Beverly and basically leaned on her leg; Beverly laughed and rubbed the dog’s head with both hands. Frank closed her eyes and panted happily.

“God she weighs a tonne,” Beverly said, “do you know how many pups?”

“No, but the vet said maybe eight, nine, something like that. I’ve already mocked up the utility room as a nursery. Like hell I’m going to give them run of the house. I know puppies. They chew. Everything.”

Talk shifted to work, as it always did. Neither of them would admit it, but talking shop was always a go to. Will was just glad that he wasn’t the only one obsessed. *Still working on a pattern, no new leads,* Beverly shrugged as she passed on the frustration. They shared their distaste for the media’s choice of nickname, the Angel of Mercy, after a local Georgia PD leaked the BAU’s suspicions that there was a religious element to the killings. *Jack was not happy about that one*, Beverly told him. Will could only imagine.

When the phone rang Will just let it, so used to ignoring the tone that it was almost involuntary.

“Aren’t you going to get that?” Beverly asked after the fourth ring while Will continued to speculate on their killer’s motivations.

“Uh,” Will blinked, picking up the phone, checking the caller ID, then putting it back down, “no.”

“Ok,” Beverly nodded slowly.

When it stopped they sat in silence for a moment. Beverly watched him, playing with her coffee cup and scratching Frank’s ear with her free hand. Eventually Will rubbed at his mouth and chin and sat back.

“He leaves voicemails,” he explained, feeling awkward at being the one to bring it up.

“Have you listened to any of them?”

“No.”

“Then delete them.”

“I...it’s just,” Will cut himself off, frowning, “it doesn’t matter.”

“Just spit it out,” Beverly said, watching him patiently, “you obviously need to.”

“I really don’t want to go here, or there, or anywhere near it. I’m not picking up the phone and it can ring as much as it likes.”

“So you still haven’t seen him?”

“Oh, no, we met up,” Will omitted the circumstances, though he wasn’t sure why, “talked for a little while,” *or you talked and he listened,* Will thought wryly.

“What did you say?”

“Goodbye,” Will said, drumming his fingers on the table.

“*Oh*. Wow. Then definitely delete them.”

“I will,” he lied.

He lasted five minutes after Beverly left. The phone sat in his hand like an oracle. Fingers ran over its sleek surface, feeling for the commands like a cat burglar feeling out a lock's sweet spot. The thing itself was a bad memory. Will hated that it mocked him as it spoke with a voice he tried not to think was solely for him.

"You have *twenty seven* new messages," the automated voice said stiltedly, "first message, October twenty second..."

...The orioles have returned to the garden but there is no birdhouse. Maybe it is hypocritical of me to say that it appears somewhat emblematic. I have left breadcrumbs on the windowsill. Perhaps they will feed. Goodnight, Will.

The first ran into the second ran into the third. Will found himself sitting, hands grasping the counter, staring at nothing and trying to tell himself he wasn't listening intently for an apology. Or that the words themselves only stabbed at his ability to keep himself defined.

...Good morning. I trust your pack returned safely. I do hope I have not spoiled them. I cannot account for all of the meat they enjoyed during their stay being of the regular fare. Winston missed you sorely and I was forced to concede to bribery. I hope you might return this call. Goodbye.

...Good afternoon Will. Things appear out of joint today. I hope it is not the same for you. I found myself baking two loaves instead of one this morning. I suppose it can be attributed to habit. Who knows? Perhaps the habit will become useful again one day. Goodbye.

...I hear you have accepted Chilton's treatment. He will not stop enthusing to me about your choice. I shan't forgive you for giving him good reason to be so conceited. Truthfully I feel that Frederick treating you is as preposterous as hiring a common decorator to restore the Sistine Chapel. However, it is your preference. Goodnight Will.

...I wonder, as I speak, whether these words shall ever be heard. I feel in a state of abjection more than on a quest for forgiveness. But then who should be so crass as to ask for forgiveness? I was once informed that forgiveness simply happens. I am in anticipation of your happening, Will.

The stilted, automated voice was silenced with fumbling fingers as it announced the next message. Will stared at it, unsure whether to be angry, unsurprised, upset, or none of the above. All he could hear was his heart beating and the ghost of fingers at his spine, settling firmly against the small of his back. Will shivered and was amazed at the visceral reaction. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply; *warm cologne and the faint hint of fire from the sitting room.* When he opened them again he felt numb, although not entirely. Nerves beneath his skin still believed the fantasy, it was a tricky achievement. One that would require help. He dialled quickly, biting the nail of his left thumb as he waited.

"Well, this is a surprise," Matthew said, sounding strangely vindicated; Will briefly considered hanging up, but the voice still echoing around his kitchen drove him to keep the line open.

"Hey," Will said for lack of a better greeting, "you free tonight?"

"Don't beat about the bush, do you?" a smile in the voice.

"It's not something I've ever been accused of, no."

“Not a problem. I kinda like that,” Will felt his face heat and scratched at his neck, “So, same place as before, around eight?”

“Sounds good.”

“I’ll see you when you see me.”

The room swam as he sat back. A slow and steady rinse of cold air drifted over his arms as the door opened and then closed, making him shiver. Will picked up his drink and finished the dregs, trying his best to ignore the multitude of warm bodies in the long, narrow bar, the heady scent of cheap perfume and beer and the low undercurrent of indefinable music. Somehow they’d managed to work their way from sociable small talk to Will’s area of expertise. He hadn’t stopped the progression because Will, at the very least, felt at home talking about his work. It smoothed the way for a pleasant evening.

“Seems like everyone’s gone crazy recently,” Matthew was saying, sitting forward with his elbows on the sticky table, eyes alight with something Will wasn’t sure he could put his finger on, “I mean the Ripper gets taken down and then *bam!* In comes another guy to take his place.”

“It’s a power vacuum,” Will shrugged, relaxing back into his chair; it was so easy to fall into the teaching mindset, his het up social neuroses drowning in a wash of, so far, bourbon and rum, “Chesapeake Ripper was an alpha, the sort others wait for to die rather than try to usurp. Now all the runts are rising up to test the waters,” he leaned forwards again and shrugged his shoulders.

“You don’t sound so enthusiastic,” Matthew said, watching him closely; Will avoided his eyes, keeping his gaze firmly at shoulder level, “I would’ve thought you’d relish the challenge. Need another one of those by the way?” he asked, nodding to the empty glass.

“Uh, yeah, in a minute,” Will said, “I’ll get the next round. What’re you drinking?”

“I’ll take another Wild Goose,” Matthew tilted his almost empty bottle, “but tell me first, you’re really not enthusiastic about your job?”

“Do I have to be?” Will asked, licking his lips.

“No, I guess not. I mean I’m not a huge fan of mine, it brings in the money. Just seems like yours would be a hard one to keep up if you didn’t at least like it.”

“It’s not really a case of liking or not liking. It’s more...a necessary evil. Anyway, wasn’t really a choice. I was roped back in. I prefer the academic side.”

“You’re a teacher? Thought you worked for the FBI?”

“I do work for the FBI,” Will said, pulling out his wallet and standing up; he flipped his badge up into the air and Matthew caught it with a sure grip. Will left him to get the next round. By the time he returned Matthew was turning it continuously between long fingers, his face contemplative. Will held out his hand and exchanged the cold bottle of beer for his badge. Will took a large sip of his whiskey and savoured the burn.

“So it is true then.”

“What?” Will looked up, passing his eyes over Matthew’s before looking out of the window to their right; in his pocket his phone rang. Will fished it out, glanced at it, and cancelled the call. He looked back to Matthew’s shoulder as he put the phone away.

“You can see people, right?” Matthew continued, “See all their little secrets, suss them out, just by looking. That’s why your workin’ cases for the BAU. You’ve got some sorta empathy thing, right? Echo-something?”

“Echopraxia,” Will refused to react.

“Right, that’s it.”

“Enjoy listening at doors Matthew?”

“Passes the time,” Brown shrugged, sitting back in his chair and taking a drink, unrepentant, “what the boss doesn’t know won’t hurt him. Or who knows,” Matthew smiled, lifting his bottle, “maybe it will one of these days.”

Will shivered as the door opened, a man and a woman walking in, arms linked, laughing. He swallowed down his unease and tried to focus. Matthew Brown was coming out of his shell even if he didn’t know it, and through the cracks Will was beginning to see something deeper than the facade Brown kept up for appearance’s sake. He waited for Brown to talk, keeping quiet and observing him in his peripheral vision.

“Don’t worry, I didn’t hear anything I shouldn’t have. Anyway, have to pass the time somehow. It’s long hours at the asylum watching the crazies, listening to their stories.”

“And yet you invited one of them out for a drink.”

“I don’t think you’re crazy,” Matthew smiled, eyes sharp.

“Maybe you should.”

“Believe me, I know crazy. I’d say you were more intriguing than crazy.”

“I get that a lot.”

“I can see why. You should hear the way the boss talks after your visits. Never heard him so animated. Was so smug when he got to tell his colleagues about treatin’ you. Especially that Dr. Lecter. Sounded like all his Christmases had come at once.”

It was difficult to restrain the reaction when he was nearing his limit. The alcohol numbed his senses, a bonus, but delayed his control. He felt his eyes blink rapidly on hearing the name, swallowing to take the bitter taste away. He washed it down with a sip of whiskey, feeling it puff up into his sinuses, tingling against the sensitive skin. He brought his eyes to the dark brown wood beneath his glass and kept them there.

“Hey, you ok?”

“Mmm.”

“Hey, why don’t you do me?”

“*Excuse* me?”

“Do your thing, you know, *see me*.”

“I’d rather not.”

“Oh come on. Maybe I want to see for myself, maybe I don’t like to listen to rumours.”

“You can’t blame me for not believing that.”

“Well your trick is the stuff of rumour.”

“It’s not a trick, it’s just...” he searched for the word, taking a drink, “observation.”

“Then observe me, Mr. Graham.”

Eyes lifted from the table where they had fallen, finding the others which watched him. Matthew’s eyes were dark, a darker brown than the table, than the beer in his bottle, the buttons on Will’s shirt. Some would have said silent ones run deep; Will would have agreed, if Matthew had been the silent type. Only Will assumed it was safe to say Matthew kept his silences for something more than just flirtation and coy banter. It was when Will looked closer that he saw someone who he hadn’t expected to meet; for a split second a flash of Hannibal stared back at him from dark eyes.

Tell me what you see, Will

“Oh I see you, it’s just most people don’t like to hear the truth,” Will said slowly, rolling his glass in his hands. A tipped head and a raised brow was his encouragement. Will took a breath, silencing the bar in his mind, letting the pendulum wipe away, *the people, the sound, the light, the distraction*, until all that was left was the man in front of him, “You’re a sphinx.”

Matthew frowned while he smiled, eyes sharpening.

“You wear many skins so that no one will see just one. A veil, always shifting. You work to sculpt your body but wear baggy clothing; not that you don’t want your endeavour to be seen, you just enjoy the act of deceiving them. You like people to think you’re dumb because it puts their defences down, only you’re really a very intelligent young man,” Matthew raised a brow; Will qualified, “No matter how many ‘g’s you drop or fancy terms you pretend to misunderstand, I’ve yet to come across a hick who uses the word ‘intriguing’. It’s all smoke and mirrors, and it allows you to feel superior to everyone else in the room. Which is why you do that thing.”

“What thing?”

“You walk too far ahead and hold the door open for Chilton so that he feels obligated to jog forwards and take it,” Will said, “you enjoy seeing him obey you,” Will could of sworn Matthew’s eyes darkened a shade, his smile tick up a notch, “Also you’re lying about how much you like your job. I see the way you look at me after Chilton leaves the room. You like walking past the cages, looking at the tigers. You’re a manipulative, egotistical and mildly sadistic individual.”

The spell broke as a hand appeared between them. Will blinked and looked left, the sound and smell and brightness sweeping back to engulf his senses, to find a barmaid collecting the empties from their table. She smiled at him and he looked away, unsure what to do with his hands now there

was nothing to hold. Eventually the silence became too much and he looked up. To his relief Matthew Brown was wearing an impressed smile beneath curious eyes.

“Uncanny,” Matthew said.

“That’s not what most people say,” Will said, his own smile far more restrained.

“Oh yeah? What do they say?”

“Fuck off,” Will said, unable to help joining in when Matthew laughed; the whiskey was hitting and Will felt it in his balance, his hand slipping from the table. He righted himself quickly, still laughing mutedly.

“Hey, you wanna get out of here?”

“I’ve probably had enough,” Will agreed.

“Come on.”

The chill of the evening had turned to a frozen night. The pavements shone with earlier rain now turned to whorls of frost. The neighbourhood scintillated. Will, already unstable enough on his own feet besides alcohol and slippery sidewalks, was convinced to put his arm around Matthew’s shoulders while his crutches were carried. Matthew used it as an excuse, Will knew, to put his own arm around Will’s waist and hold him tightly.

“No way you’re driving home. Crash at mine. I live just round the corner.”

“Of course you do,” Will laughed and shook his head, “been planning this long?”

“Well I am manipulative and egotistical,” Matthew said.

“Sorry,” Will knew he was drunk if he was apologising, hating the way the freezing air cut at his throat, “it’s always a game of Russian roulette when I’m asked for my opinion.”

“Don't worry about it. I like a man that can speak his mind.”

He had reached the everything-is-funny stage of drunk by the time they exited the elevator in Matthew’s apartment building. Will was impressed by the man’s restraint, managing to wait a two block journey at a snail’s pace, a long elevator ride, fiddling with keys and locks, and closing his front door behind them before he had Will up against the wall, tongue doing wicked things to the inside of his mouth.

“Too fast?” Matthew asked as they broke apart.

“Didn’t think you’d care to ask.”

“Been thinking about how you tasted since the first time I saw you.”

A pause while Matthew kissed at his throat.

“That sounds creepier now that I say it out loud.”

“It is a little.”

“Enough to call you a cab?”

“No.”

“Good.”

Matthew’s apartment revealed a fastidious nature. Will didn’t think he’d ever seen a young, single man’s apartment so clean, neat and yet still holding a lived in look. It wasn’t sterile, it was just...unusual. Will found himself lowered onto a beige sofa facing a dark, dead television, while Matthew disappeared into the next room. Will fished his phone out of his pocket when it began digging into his hip and put it on the table. He put his coat on the arm of the sofa before observing his surroundings more closely.

The walls were an off cream, seeming yellower in the low light of a tall standing lamp in the corner. Following the room to the right Will found a cabinet full of dvds, a tall bookshelf in the far corner, a small frame containing what looked like a charcoal sketch. Will thought he recognised the amorphous cubic shapes, a name springing up without his consent: *Otto Dix*. It unnerved him and he passed over it. When he turned his head fully he was granted the view of a through arch in the wall that led to a small kitchen.

“You hungry?” the question came as Matthew reappeared.

“I’m a bit of a gremlin about time, it’s better not to feed me after midnight,” Will said, suppressing an instinctual laugh and shiver.

“Oh yeah? Then how about getting you wet?”

“I don’t think it’s worth the risk,” Will raised a brow at the double entendre.

“Turn into a bit of an animal do you, Mr. Graham?”

“You really have to stop with the Mister crap, Matthew, you’re making me sound like a teacher.”

“You *are* a teacher,” Matthew saw down next to him, *close, touching*, and Will couldn’t find the impetus to move away.

“Making me sound like *your* teacher then. How old are you anyway?”

“Why’s it matter?”

“I suppose it doesn’t,” Will said as Matthew slipped his hand across Will’s shoulders.

“I’m twenty eight.”

“Christ,” Will said, covering his face with both hands and laughing into the cupped fingers as he listened to Matthew move about, the hand at his shoulders disappearing as swiftly as it appeared, “nearly a decade. Yup, I could be your teacher.”

“Then maybe I’ll learn something. You got a lesson in mind?”

“I’ve got a lot in my mind but no one wants it.”

“Maybe you just haven’t been askin’ the right people.”

“Maybe the right people to ask are also the wrong people,” Will said; his hands opened up, fingers pushing up into his hair. He felt Matthew leave the couch but his voice stayed close.

“Well, sometimes you need wrong people for wrong things.”

“We shouldn’t be...”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know,” Will licked his lips and frowned, “No, I do know. We barely know each other, we’re professionally involved, I’m really bad at this. Take your pick.”

“How about I pick: you really turn me on.”

“Didn’t know that was a category,” Will said, tensing.

“Yeah, that much is obvious. No offence but do you own a mirror?”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” Will frowned, smiling drunkenly.

“You should take a look sometime,” Matthew said; Will felt hands running up over his jean clad calves, then his knees, “maybe you’ll figure it out.”

Will opened his mouth to ask *what*? but stopped, his thighs clenching, as he felt hands at his zipper; one holding the material stiff as the other quickly pulled the metal teeth open. His breath caught in his throat, brain doing a confused twirl, stuttering as a warm hand delved inside. It was just lust, he told himself, just shameless lust. Or should that be shameful? Maybe it didn’t need to be either. His eyes blinked and he sucked in a breath through his teeth as he was pulled free of his underwear, the air chill against his heated flesh.

He had words of protest ready, just no time with which to say them.

“No-*ah*...” Will began only to have it strangled out into a gasping moan as Matthew took the tip of his half-ready cock into his mouth and tongued the slit roughly.

Unsure where to put his hands, his drink addled mind chose to grip the back of the sofa, fingers curled into the soft material on either side of his head. His face craned to the left, cheek pressed flush against the underside of his bicep, eyes tightly closed. *A whisper at his ear.* Will ignored it. He shook as wet lips descended upon him, followed by a soft, sucking heat comprised of spongy flesh that undulated as it sank. Will let out a restrained cry through gritted teeth, more a growl than anything legible. When the descent stopped, tantalisingly half way, Will was unable to stop the involuntary spasm of his hips. Two hands reached up to grab them tightly, -*there’ll be bruises there tomorrow*, the whisper said-, and the mouth retreated, dragging hollowed out cheeks up over the sensitive flesh.

He flopped out as Matthew straightened up, engorged prick bouncing up to lie flat against his abdomen. Will forced himself to crack open his eyes and look down through the narrow gap at the sight between his legs.

“I feel like maybe I’m teaching you something, *Mister Graham*,” said to provoke, he knew, even through smiling lips, “don’t tell me mine’s the first mouth you've ever had.”

“Would it matter if it was?”

“You kidding? Gorgeous guy like you hasn’t ever had someone suck him off? What kind of world are we livin’ in?”

“One where that injustice is apparently about to be corrected,” Will couldn’t help laughing at his own hackneyed line, “god, I sound like a...you. I sound like you.”

“I’m thinking I should take that as a compliment,” Matthew said casually as he began fisting the base of Will’s hardening cock; yet Will could see it, *the rigidity in the eyes that spoke of a predator provoked.*

“Temper, temper,” Will said sleekly, watching Matthew through one slit open eye.

A slight hitch, showing in Matthew’s eyes as they jolted a little wider and in his hand as it momentarily faltered. Then, as Will thought he might have stepped too far, a wide smile split open the young man’s face. A dark stripe broken up by hints of white teeth. Will blinked as he thought he saw a shadow there, *antlers on porcelain*. There was a tickle of breath by his ear and Will shook.

“Still so sharp,” Matthew leaned in to lave at the thick vein running on the underside, making Will’s cock jump in his hand, “even when you’re half cut and half hard.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere,” Will sighed breathily, finding it difficult to think straight as Matthew enveloped him again; he felt oddly reluctant and inexperienced, “*unh*, can I...can I touch you?”

The hummed approval had Will starting up from his slouch against the sofa, puffing out a heady breath. His right hand found its way to Matthew’s short, dark hair, rubbing through his fingers like raven fur. The detachment in his mind was wobbling loose, filling his hand with a phantom sensation of another’s touch. Will couldn’t stop staring at it, moving up and down languorously in time with the heightened ecstasy thrumming at his core. *A long, low sound, like a bray at dusk*. He thought it might have come from his own throat.

The stag was in the room.

Will closed his eyes, feeling Matthew let go of the base and slip his hand down to cup Will’s testicles, caressing gently. The mouth slid lower. Will scrunched his eyes closed tighter and felt himself curl forwards. *A sensation of fingers at the base of his spine, pressing there possessively.* He leaned forwards as Matthew held still and did something down and dirty with a swirl of tongue and hollowing of cheeks. Will pushed his nose against the short, dark strands of ticklish hair and breathed in deeply. *A heady musk, an animal in heat outweighed only by the rippling scent of menace.* Will shivered, breathing out as the head slipped away from him, swallowing him whole. He unfurled, collapsing back against the couch, his hand rubbing downwards to grip forcefully at the exposed neck below carefully cropped hair. Will could feel eyes on him, watching, waiting. He could feel something in the corner of the room, studying him.

Ebony claws traced his shoulders, held him close. Will wasn’t sure if the breath at his throat was real or imagined. The feeling made him weak at the knees.

“You’re going to make me-*ah*,” Will said tightly, “*I’m*...”

The mouth slid up and off with a soft sound, then there was a hand around him, rubbing slickly up over the saliva wet flesh. Will felt his abdominal muscles contract, tightening as the hand manipulated him relentlessly. *The hands at his shoulders descended, wrapping across his chest,*

pulling him close. He bared his teeth, eyes tight-shut. He felt Matthew against him as the man leaned up, covered, pressed against him from the front while he felt the phantom hold him possessively from behind. Warm breath against his face, still turned from the scene as a hunter denies the head upon the plate. Will felt as if he were sitting upon the edge of his line of vision, staring in at his own debauchery.

"Cum for me baby," Matthew whispered against his lips.

Shh, the black lips whispered, *you did so well*

"Oh fuck," Will gritted out, hips jerking; spurts of pearlescent white shot up over his pale red shirt while Matthew slowed his pace, eyes rapt, massaging slowly as Will shook, panting. The stag smiled at his ear, antlers locking with Matthew's as they crowded Will against the couch. No, he thought, *no*. Will lunged forwards, the sensation almost too much, "ah*, ah*. Fuck me, Matthew, just *fuck me*."

"But you already..." Matthew started.

"Don't argue with me, just *do it*," Will growled, grabbing a fistful of Matthew's shirt.

"God damn," Matthew said in a low voice, right hand fumbling to his own fly, "you can't say things like that to me, makes me wanna do bad things to you."

And he did, only Will was the only one who knew they weren't alone while he did them. He was rocked back and forth under a lithe body, Matthew's sculpted chest flat against his back as he panted through his nose and Will tried his best to stay upright on shaking thighs and arms. He kept his eyes forwards, trained on the sofa arm, because he couldn't bring himself to look out into the room in case the stag stood there. He tried his best to keep control, but soon it slipped, *too tired, too pleasantly hazy, too confused, too anxious,* and the predator above him yanked the reigns from his fingers. Matthew rode him hard and fast, the sound of flesh slapping against flesh loud and stark in the small living room. Will grit his teeth and bore the rough friction, obeying without question when Matthew pulled free and demanded, "turn over baby, I want you where I can see you". He was pulled close as Matthew slipped back inside, a deft tongue working its way into his mouth. Will felt devoured. *My, my, what an appetite you have.* It wasn't much longer before everything came to a head.

"Shit," Matthew keened as if in pain, driving in hard, "so fucking good. Will, god dammit. *Fuck.*"

Will grimaced at the feeling as Matthew finished inside of him. An odd memory was quick to leap on the disadvantage as it showed, and, too weak to fight it off, it spoke into his ear. Hannibal's words, over and over in their unknown tongue, even though it was the stag-man who stared down at him over Matthew's heaving back, white eyes sightless as its mouth moved in a repetitious rhythm: *neikada neikada neikada*. What did you mean? Will wanted to ask, What did you want to say to me? Will felt coldly sober as he stared up at the ceiling, forcing the illusions to fade as reality sank back in.

It was difficult to stop the short gasp escaping his throat as Matthew pulled out, the younger man sitting up to straddle Will's hips. He peered up at him, shirt open to show sweat-shined skin, pants pulled low over his slim hips with his flaccid cock drooping over his undone fly. Will lay against the couch, trying to bring his breathing back to normal and ignore the uncomfortable feeling of semen leaking onto the sofa cushions. Matthew was watching him through lazy eyes but his stare was intent, curious. Will watched as a hand reached up to touch his exposed chest where his shirt

had ridden up. Fine fingers traced over the raised, white scar tissue between Will's third and fourth ribs, below his heart.

"Who stabbed you?" he was asked, Matthew skipping the usual step of asking what had happened.

"A woman with nothing to lose," Will said, his own hand tracing up over Matthew's skin, stopping at a long, still-pink scar that travelled a straight road from his inner thigh to his left hip, "who cut you?"

"A guy in prison that didn't appreciate me not bending over when he said so," Matthew covered Will's hand with his own, looking at him and licking his lips, "doesn't bother you, does it? That I've been inside?"

"What were you in for?"

"Assault and battery."

"Well," Will took a long breath and let it out slowly, his left forearm coming up to lay across his forehead, "I'd be a hypocrite if I shoved you out in the cold for that."

"Don't tell me you've been inside," Matthew looked amusedly sceptical, "didn't think the FBI let felons in the door."

"No, I haven't," Will said, "but then...well, you work with Abel Gideon."

"Uh huh. Wait," an interested frown, "you did that?"

"He hurt a friend of mine."

"I don't doubt he deserved it," Matthew shrugged, "Least you stopped him talking. He used to never shut up. Anyway guy's a fraud. Couldn't stop going on about being the Chesapeake Ripper."

"And you knew he was a fraud how?"

"Like I said," Matthew shrugged, "he's all talk."

Will decided to let it slide, but filed the comment away for later.

"But then if you've been inside, how'd you end up working for Chilton? Thought he had strict policies."

"The Boss? Strict policies? Don't believe everything you hear. He's lenient on who he hires, as long as we're willing to do a little extra without grumbling and turn a blind eye when he wants it. Don't get me wrong, there's few and far between that respect him but, well, it's work. More than I'd get anywhere else. And..." the hand stopped flicking its fingers up and down over Will's scar to reach up and trace his cheek, "guess I shouldn't knock it considering it put you in my path, huh."

"Mmm," Will closed his eyes and wondered if it was the alcohol loosening his tongue or something more intimate, "that's reason enough to..."

A shrill ring interrupted him. Will reached out on instinct to silence it, only to have his hand stopped, long fingers wrapped about his wrist. He looked up at Matthew, watching him closely.

“That phone’s been ringing since I met you, and all you do is ignore it. In fact you came out with me after you cancelled the call that day. Avoiding someone Will?”

“Maybe,” Will said, feeling challenged somehow but not sure why; his drunken instincts flared and he retorted without thinking, “maybe you don’t have me as all to yourself as you’d like.”

Eyes narrowed but lips quirked minutely. He couldn’t explain why he didn’t stop Matthew when he reached for the phone and picked it up. Later he would blame it on the alcohol but know, deep down, it was an action born of spite.

“Yeah?” Matthew answered casually; Will closed his eyes and could only imagine how Hannibal might be reacting, *head coming up straight, eyes narrowing, hands stilling in whatever action they had been performing,* “this is Matthew, who’s this? No, he’s indisposed at the moment. A message? I don’t think he wants to hear anything you have to say. Oh I know so. Mmm. Actually I think *you’re* the one being rude here. Well, we’ll just have to agree to disagree. You have a good night now.”

By the time Matthew was done Will was laughing again, although unsure whether it was humorous or just plain miserable. He stayed still as he heard the phone clunked back onto the coffee table and felt Matthew lean down across him. He did not open his eyes as he felt a mouth against his, and couldn’t be sure just whose lips he was imagining when he returned the kiss.

Chapter End Notes

The Otto Dix drawing on Matthew's wall is this one:

http://www.ottodix.org/index/catalog-item/126.003.html

Matthew seems like the kind of creepy, disturbed guy who'd have Otto's war sketches on his wall.

Entracte

Chapter Notes

IMPORTANT NOTE!

Ok, so this is a short, incongruous chapter but with good reason. I am actually due into hospital (later today) as I'm having major surgery tomorrow. I had hoped I could get the next chapter finished in time for it but I was only given five days notice and it's only about a third done. So I thought a little intermission would be nice instead, and relevant as quite a few people seemed to want to see the other side of Hannibal's phone call with Matthew.
I've been waiting three months for this (honestly NHS!) and so I'm not sure when I'll be home. It'll hopefully only take about 5-6 days recovery time, depending if it's laser surgery or not, which is what I had last time (I've been ill for a couple of years with ulcerative colitis and have already had major surgery because of it. This is surgery 2 of 3). So if it is anything like last time I'll be home in a week, and, even though I'll be hobbling about and pretty useless, I'll be writing like a demon because there will be little else to do!
So, just to let you all know why the pace will have slowed down a bit considering how fast I was updating before. I'm just hoping that the surgeon is just as skilled (if not as psychopathic) as Hannibal. One can always hope...

Title translation: 'Entracte' - Intermission

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It would perhaps be odd to say, but Alana was sure she could taste the fraught nature of the chef in her meal. The delicate broccoli rabe she placed in her mouth was slightly overcooked and the duck breast was dry as she pulled it apart with knife and fork. A little too much sherry in the sauce.

She didn’t think she’d ever seen Hannibal be anything less than perfect; or at least allow himself to be observed as such. The oversight was incredibly telling. She thought he might have known it too, in the way he did not ask her what she thought after the first mouthful. Chilton, she thought, he had seen Chilton that morning. No need to ask where the bad mood sprang from when Frederick was involved.

She smiled and said it was delicious without prompting, of course; she would because it was only polite, and Hannibal had spent a full afternoon preparing it.

“Will it take long?” she asked.

“Not long,” Hannibal said as he eyed his fork with mild censure, “I’m due back in Baltimore on Thursday. It is only a three day conference. A short shock.”

“Well, I’m jealous,” she said, “I think I’m getting northern cabin fever. I feel the need for sunshine and sangria on a beach somewhere but right now I’d settle for a conference on Transcultural Psychology in Georgia.”

“Perhaps I should spirit you away somewhere soon,” Hannibal said, smiling marginally.

“Don’t offer what you can’t give,” she said tiredly, “we’re both booked. After you come back I’ve got a fat filofax till the seventeenth of November. Paradise will have to wait.”

“Paradise is not subject to location. I’m sure we can have our slice. Are you ready for desert?”

“When am I not?” she smiled.

And the smile was a perfect coverall. It was because she *wanted* things to be normal, nice and easy, not because they were. It couldn’t be nice, normal or easy because she knew exactly what was happening in the next room while Hannibal plated up the last of the dinner they were sharing together. The phone had made its appearance, she knew it had.

She looked up to the other side of the table and imagined she found a pair of elusive eyes avoiding hers. An inexplicable silhouette. Will was constantly in the room, even though she knew he shouldn’t be. Wouldn’t be, if he wasn’t kept there by a near constant connection.

A connection she was not a part of, but of which she had caught snippets. The soft timbre of Hannibal’s voice through the door when she returned from the bathroom, or sometimes as she walked towards him while he waited by the car before he pocketed the phone, or even once or twice as she blinked awake and found him standing by the window in his loose robe, phone to his ear, eyes distant. He would hang up and stare outwards, beyond the glass and, seemingly, whatever lay beyond that.

She could hear the ends of words, spelling out unknown messages, but she couldn’t comment. At first she’d tried to convince herself that the calls could be to anyone, they could be business, they could be friends and colleagues...it never stuck. She knew better.

In a way she was entirely unsure what to say other than to be mutely frustrated. Because it was as Hannibal had said: they were both ‘*a little lost in his wake’.* Will was staying illusive and, as long as he did, he was a phantom to which there was no recourse. She was not worried to confront Hannibal for his neglect, merely that there was nothing to confront him on. He was courteous and attentive, ever ready to be there for her when she needed him.

Only...

She finished her wine and sighed. It was a useful excuse. *Why’d you do it to yourself?* She knew why. As she stood up and walked to the kitchen doorway it was only the end of the gesture which she caught; the hand lowering the phone to the countertop, gracefully slipping the small, black slab onto the treated wood while the oven was opened. It felt like an entirely open and expected perfidy.

Will is our friend, she thought, it’s only natural that he should be so concerned. It’s only natural. Yet, ‘natural’ would surely only apply to normal people. Hannibal was not normal, not by any means; he was exceptional. Which only made it worse because, in truth, since meeting him she couldn’t imagine Hannibal Lecter being so truly smitten with anyone. Imagination had taken her and placed her on that pedestal many times, she wouldn’t lie. Only now she was sure that position had been usurped by another; the man-not-in-the-room but always in the room.

Their first meeting had been a charmed moment, she wouldn’t lie and try and to twist it sour to fit her resentment. In a room full of stuffy old men in suits and ties and golden cufflinks, welcoming her into a place where she felt she certainly wasn’t welcome or wanted, Hannibal had stood in the

corner and waited his turn. He always waited, she found that out quickly. A firm yet subtle handshake and a short exchange:

“Charmed,” she’d said.

“I am sure I will be,” he had replied.

And they had sparked.

It had been pleasant to feel special in his eyes because they didn’t seem to alight upon many people with much interest. Polite civility, yes, interest, no. Hannibal was as discerning in his tastes in relationships as he was in cuisine or clothing. She had been pulled under his wing and felt happily awash in the jealousy of her colleagues and her own contentment at being at the top. How young and foolish I was, she thought to herself as she stood in the doorway cradling her empty glass.

Now she felt second best to her own guilt, and to Hannibal’s obsession. The word seemed too harsh somehow: obsession. Only she knew it wasn’t. To be cursed as a psychologist specialising in criminal profiling: everyone was, to some extent, entirely transparent. It was not often Hannibal could be considered glass-like and, even now, she wasn’t sure she could fully see through to the other side. He was opaque, always hiding shadows and silhouette’s behind the pale.

“Would you prefer raspberry coulis or cherry tkemali?” she was asked as the oven was clicked off and Hannibal retrieved a pair of thick oven gloves.

I would prefer you tell me what you say on that damn phone, she thought.

“I trust your judgement,” she said instead.

“Well, warm almond tart should certainly have a sharp edge, I always think,” he said, smiling.

The baking sheet, with two symmetrical pastries atop it, was set onto the steel countertop. She watched him paint the waiting white plates dark with an almost black sauce, before positioning the tarts in a perfect centrality.

Terrible, yet strictly controlled, OCD. She saw it in the way he pushed books perfectly in line with the edges of side tables, or moved cutlery with minute angles to line up with plates and napkins; a deep seated need to have complete control of his environment. Before it had always endeared her to him as a delightful irony; the neurotic psychologist treating other’s neuroses. Now all it did was remind her of Will, his house rife with order, seen from the sneaked peak in his wardrobe and chest of drawers, socks and shirts all neatly folded like automatons on the factory line.

Now she felt that all she did with Hannibal was try to ignore the shadow in the room. It had become worse, lately, because of Will’s stubborn and entirely perplexing refusal to keep contact with either of them.

“Shall we take it upstairs?” he asked as he handed her the plate, “The fire should still be burning.”

“Mmm,” she hummed by way of reply, picking up a spoon and heading for the sitting room.

She did not miss that the phone was slickly retrieved and slipped into a waiting trouser pocket. It was as if Will were carried up the stairs with them as they ascended. It was as she sat down upon

the red sofa, plate in hand, firelight to her left, dark window to her right, that she realised, suddenly, she'd had enough.

"Why doesn't Will ever call you back?"

Hannibal did not flinch as he placed a few fresh logs on the fire, his face neutral. He stood, smoothing down his shirt, and sat opposite her at the low coffee table. The harpsichord sat by the window, catching the light of the flames as a sparks of yellow and gold against black lacquer. She stared at it while she waited for a reply, taking a large mouthful of tart. It was beautiful, she couldn't deny it, the sour cherries coating the base a wonderful contrast to the sweet, moist pastry.

It took the edge off, slightly. Even when Hannibal decided to forego denying her veiled accusation and skipped straight to the answer she wasn't sure yet that she wanted.

"I believe Will is in an indeterminate state," Hannibal took a mouthful of tart and chewed thoughtfully, though she noticed his eyes narrow slightly in pleasure, "still adjusting. It is difficult for him to understand the relationship between the three of us and it makes him distant."

"He's not the only one," Alana said, forcing Hannibal's eyes to her, "look...I know you care about me, I'm not asking for reassurance, and I care about you too but, well, this has got to stop."

No answer further than a genuinely confused frown. Hannibal placed his plate back onto the table and clasped his hands, resting his elbows upon his knees as he leaned forwards. She felt studied.

"Don't give me that look," she said, "the reason Will doesn't call you back isn't because he's jealous," she remembered their kiss before the snow strewn cabin, as he frowned and told her he couldn't be with her, "That's...that's redundant," she said, emphasising the word with a short wave of her hand, "he told me he was seeing someone else, that he was happy, I...what aren't you telling me?"

"Jealousy is never redundant, regardless of the state of affairs."

"You didn't answer my question. Will always confided in you, you knew him best."

"I believe the past tense is a little presumptuous."

"Well if you were still the one to know him best then you'd be able to tell me why he's being so damn obstinate. The two of you are like *playground* children after a falling out and I'm stuck in the middle. I'm too old for this sort of nonsense Hannibal."

"I had not realised you were so upset."

"No, you hadn't. God," she rubbed at her face and put her plate down with the other hand, "I don't want to argue about this. You know I shouldn't have to ask, but could you just tell me what's wrong, please?"

A moment of deliberation, visible on Hannibal's face as a sliding of eyes over to the left. She could see the fire reflected there. There had been times when she thought that he would be the one person in her life who would never lie to her. Now she wasn't so sure.

"Will believes," Hannibal started slowly, "that I have betrayed his confidence."

"And have you?" she asked, frowning.

“Whether I have or not is inconsequential. He believes it, therefore it is true for him.”

“Can’t be that inconsequential if he’s cut you out completely.”

“You know very well how difficult it is to gain Will’s trust, and how easy it is to lose it.”

“Yes, I do,” she admitted, “but it’s never that simple. Will isn’t petty, he has to have his reasons.”

“And those reasons do not have to be rational. I did not betray him, he just has to realise that on his own terms.”

“Then why do you keep calling him?” she asked pointedly, crossing her arms and sitting back on the sofa.

“Would you rather I walked away from Will, trailing his accusations? And what would walking away leave us?”

“Each other.”

“That seems unnecessarily cruel of you,” Hannibal tipped his head, “suggesting that we bury him.”

“I don’t want to bury him, we shouldn’t *have to* bury him. Only the two of you are making it a stick or twist scenario. It shouldn’t be this hard.”

“Then perhaps if you were to call him.”

“What?”

“You have not tried then, yes, I thought not.”

“I don’t see the point,” Alana said, feeling caught out, “he made it pretty clear how he feels.”

“He does not pick up the phone to me,” Hannibal continued, “perhaps he will for you. Then perhaps you can have the closure you are looking for.”

“I...” it was on the tip of her tongue to reject the idea as futile and childish, but the thought of spending another night in this limbo was just as torturous. Eventually she stood, irritated but resolute, “Fine, fine I’ll call. This is really just crazy. *Crazy*.”

She came back to the sitting room with the phone to her ear as it rang, partly because she didn’t want to be alone if it was picked up, but mainly because she wanted to show Hannibal how ridiculous he was being. How farcical they had allowed everything to become. Will had been through hell, Alana had been through hell too, and Hannibal had suffered for both of them as he watched on. We should be supporting each other, she thought as the ring shrilled, not sulking like toddlers.

“Yeah?”

It was half shock at the phone being answered at all, and the other half shock at it being an unexpected, stranger’s voice. Alana blinked, hesitated, and then did the only thing she could think of to extricate herself from the situation without losing the opportunity altogether. She tossed the phone to Hannibal who caught it effortlessly despite his genuine surprise at her action.

She shrugged, widening her eyes and lifting her hands as he gave her a chastising glance before putting the phone to his ear.

“Hello? Who is this?”

No frown, yet his eyes were clear and cool as they stared off towards the window, left hand upon his knee. Alana began to feel a little embarrassed at her behaviour but also the outrageous need to laugh at the absurdity of it all.

“I am a friend of Will, if you would please put him on. I see...then may I leave him a message?” a pause during which the need to laugh had a bucket of cold water dumped down its spine as Hannibal’s eyes veritably sharpened, his hand tightening marginally around the phone itself; Alana licked her lips and wished she could hear the other caller, “I fail to see how this is any concern of yours, or how you would presume to know his wishes. Ah, then you believe yourself an arbitrator?” a sudden, disarming smile which matched the eyes only in their veiled, shark-like quality, “None that I have come across have been so interminably rude. Oh? And here I thought I was being civil,” the smile widened and the eyes softened, as if hearing something from afar that pleased him, “do give Will my regards.”

The phone was placed with an unceremonious click against the wooden tabletop, before being slid across the surface towards Alana by fore and middle fingers. Hannibal retracted his hand, staring into the middle distance between himself and the table, hands once more clasped. The smile was still in place, almost foolishly fond.

“Who..?” she left the question hanging, while all she wanted to ask was ‘*what the hell was all that about?’*

“A ‘Matthew’, if I heard correctly,” Hannibal said, finding her eyes.

“Matthew? I don’t think I know a Matthew,” Alana rubbed at her arms and shook her head, “sorry about the phone I...I panicked there. Not sure why,” the laugh finally broke free, smooth and soft, “oh god, now I’m the kid in the playground too. This isn’t fair.”

“I can think of far worse things to be,” and his eyes seemed to believe it too, Alana thought, as the dangerous glint returned; it was smoothed away quickly and without ceremony, “if it is any consolation Will indeed sounded happy.”

“You heard him?”

“I heard him laugh,” Hannibal qualified, “perhaps, as you say, we are over thinking things.”

“I told you, it can be simple sometimes,” she shrugged, still feeling a little out of place, “we’re psychiatrists, we’re programmed to over-think,” she sat down with a puff of air and a shake of her head, arms still folded; she decided not to bring up the dangerous look Hannibal had momentarily adopted while talking on the phone. It was too close to analysis.

“Come, finish your dessert,” Hannibal said, “I’ll fetch us some more wine.”

And somehow it became as simple as she had hoped. There was the sensation of walking free, somehow, away from the burden that had been weighing upon her without reason or explanation, even as she felt a nagging guilt prickling beneath her feet. No, she wasn’t burying Will, she was unshackling them both.

The tart tasted even better without her own added bitterness. She smiled and allowed herself to enjoy the fire, the sweet almond smell in the air, the idea of kissing Hannibal goodnight without the Shadow standing and watching them both in silent judgement. Just the two of them, for a little while, until things were easier and maybe Will could bring himself to tell her what was wrong. Just the two of them, for as long as either could allow it.

It was only when Hannibal had been gone longer than it should really take to fetch wine that she decided to slink downstairs and look for him.

“Hannibal?” she asked as she stepped into the kitchen; no one, and no reply. The room was empty.

The living room was similarly vacant, as was the library. Alana frowned, feeling as if she were being simultaneously foolish and toyed with. Why can’t things just be simple? She asked herself as she walked towards the hallway, leading to the bathroom. No one, the door swung open.

“Hannibal?” she said again, a little louder, as she returned to the main hall and stood before the staircase.

“Apologies,” she started badly and turned to see him walk from the kitchen; he looked at her with a flash of momentary scrutiny, the sort of look given to a nosy child who might have been wandering where they shouldn’t, before smiling and handing her a chill bottle of white wine, “I was in the pantry and became a little carried away with my selection.”

“As long as the phone didn’t make an appearance, then you can take as long as you like fetching the wine,” she said wryly, checking the label and raising an eyebrow at the date.

“Would you like to check my calls?” Hannibal was smiling broadly now.

“I am not going to be the girl that checks phone logs, no,” Alana said demurely, a hint of derisiveness to her tone, “come on, let’s open this before it gets too late. You have an early flight, don’t you?”

“And so much to do,” he said enigmatically, linking his arm with hers as they walked back upstairs, “in so little time.”

So she would allow herself tonight, as a reprieve, because she knew she’d manage to let go of the shadow even if, despite his best efforts to seem as such, Hannibal was not truly able to.

Chapter End Notes

And we all know what's in the pantry. Hannibal's been downstairs. Although I doubt either Matthew or Will are going to see his retribution coming.

Also, yes, Hannibal is going to Georgia...he just can't help himself, can he?

Carnaval des Cornes de Cerf

Chapter Notes

"Carnaval des Cornes de Cerf" - 'Carnival of Antlers'

Hello all! Just wanted to say thank you all so much for your kind words regarding my being in hospital, I will try and go back and reply to reviews and such as I have been remiss in that area recently (as you can understand). And also to say I am feeling much better now. Sorry for the long delay in updating but I ended up being a lot more ill than intended with a serious infection after surgery, and am now trying my best to recover before my (hopefully) last surgery at the end of February. Honestly, what a lot of palava, as we say in the UK.

So, I hope that this update is up to spec. I feel it is a little disjointed, what with being written over 2 months, so hopefully that doesn't come across too much as I tried to smooth it out a little. This one also ended up being far longer than expected (again) so a lot of what was supposed to be in it has been pushed to the next chapter. I really need to get a grip on my short story writing skills (wherever they may be)!

Ps: There is a scene in this chapter taken from Manna Francis' 'Administration' series (full notes and a link at the end!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The woman sitting on the chair in the wide, echoing room held an air of shaggy melancholy which should have been off putting. Instead her sunken blue eyes and her mousy brown hair drew in his passing gaze, as if desperate to tell a sad story that was perhaps only half remembered.

Walking by his father's side Will felt the need not to stare. They stopped at the reception desk and his father's gruff voice announced their appointment. Will looked back, grey eyes clear. When the nurse took his father for his check up Will mumbled a 'yes' to the order to 'stay put'.

The woman's hands were moving, fingers gnarled beyond the years of her face. Will watched, quietly, spying the handkerchief as it turned and turned between fingertips, being folded smaller and smaller. With every crease something was kept inside, cherished, a thought, a memory. He could see it in the way she smiled as she reached the end, holding it dear.

"Good afternoon Ann," an abrasive voice interrupted; Will watched the nurse walk into view, taking the woman by her arm. The eyes did not register the words, the hands continued their task, "here, come on now, put that down."

A plume of silk erupted from quivering hands as the nurse pulled the tightly held square handkerchief and shook it violently. Will felt the need to quiver with it. Memories scattered like dead flies from a lampshade.

Will, standing alone, was left wondering if she would find them again.

Or if they were lost forever.

“I’m going to have to ask you to stop calling here, Mr. Graham,” the curt, female voice told him, “I told you a month and a half ago that if we find anyone matching your description we will contact you immediately. And I’ve told you the same thing every week since then.”

“I just want to make sure you’re still looking,” Will said, his tone tight even though he felt foolish for being indignant, “I know how the system works.”

“We get hundreds of kids through here every month and I have enough trouble making sure *they’re* alright. I’m not trying to be harsh, I don’t mean to upset, it’s just that you have to understand you’re not exactly unique,” she said, becoming angry despite her platitudes, Will could tell, “you know how many parents call me every day about kids far younger than Abigail is? I don’t have the time to feel sorry for you. Now, I have your contact details.”

“Isn’t there...”

“You *have* to stop calling here.”

“Isn’t there anything you can..?”

The dial tone answered his unfinished question. Will pulled in his top lip and ran it through his teeth. The receiver clicked back into place with finality. Will stood in the hallway and tried to ignore the hollow feeling growing in his chest. His fingers stroked over the angular lines of the phone as he stared straight ahead, sightless; seeing a face that should be beside him, now nothing more than a memory.

Letting go of the receiver felt like an omen every time, as if he were giving up. He did not need the pretence; the ghosts would haunt him regardless.

Outside the ground was covered in a thin layer of cake frosting-like snow. The landscape became transformed from scrub brown and wilted grass green to a pristine white, dotted with momentary imperfections of that which it covered trying desperately to break through. Will stared at it as he washed up the lunchtime dishes and wondered if he was somehow stuck, cursed to live eternally as a winter being; a snow golem trudging the fields with his wind-up pack of toy dogs.

The water drained away from the sink, leaving behind a residue of bubbles over the stainless steel. In the midst of the wilderness, leagues from civilisation, Will could fancy himself a fairytale character living in a fairytale story. Not as wonderful as it would sound to others. Most of the fairy stories he’d ever heard were dark enough to merit his signature.

He doubted he would get his happy ending, no matter how many people seemed determined to force it upon him.

He let the phone ring as he walked about the kitchen, moving things into place, sorting the clean knives into the knife drawer by size and function. It stopped just as he was cleaning out the bread bin of crumbs. His life felt like leftovers, crumbs trying to live out the shadow of the whole loaf; he imagined each one a mote of life: ideas, hopes, fears, desires. Just as he swept them into his other hand, catching their soft little bodies and smiling grimly at the thought, the phone began its vigil once more. Will stared down at the cluster of worried, shivering crumbs and felt as if someone was ruffling the pages of his story.

“Should I let them in?” he asked; the crumbs quivered in response and Will took a moment to realise what he was doing. He laughed, albeit a little frantically, “christ’s sake, I’m talking to crumbs.”

The phone revealed someone he hadn’t expected.

“I’d try and guess what’s wrong,” Will said after Jack had muttered out a greeting, “but it could be so many different things that I think it best you just tell me.”

“Our guy, the *Angel of Mercy*...” Jack said with dislike, followed by a long sigh and a pause which Will didn’t feel he had the right to interrupt, “we found him.”

“You *found* him?” Will said, sitting forwards on the sofa excitedly, realising how his doubt might appear disrespectful, “I don’t mean to sound...look, I know it’s a lot to ask but if I could come in and talk to...”

“We found him,” Jack interrupted, “I didn’t say anything about him being alive.”

“Oh,” Will couldn’t find anything more appropriate to say, “I...alright.”

“I think...” Jack sounded disquieted, “I understand this is a lot to ask, considering, but I want you to do me a favour.”

“You can ask.”

“There’s something I need confirmed but, so far, everything’s been a little up in the air, the department’s...well, look, I don’t think this is really a phone conversation. Come in tomorrow, after ten am?”

“You want me in,” Will said, deadpan, unable to make it a question.

“Just do me this one favour,” Jack sighed, “and maybe we can sort all this out, ok?”

“Nice and vague. Just how I like it.”

“I would really appreciate just one conversation with you that wasn’t filled with difficult, you know that?”

“Get in line,” Will shrugged, continuing before Jack could become indignant, “I’ll be there, just after ten.”

“...Thanks.”

The phone clicked dead. Will stared at it and wondered aloud.

“Not ready to be caught,” he murmured; the phone shone as he tipped his hand towards the window, “and I’m not ready to end my crusade either. So much left to do...” he frowned. The phone fell to the floor and Will blinked and shook his head, “then why am I dead?”

The television clicked on with a jump of sound and a blink of light, blasting out some inane advert for painkillers. Will pressed mute and skipped to the twenty four hour news, watching the scroll at the bottom while he waited for the headlines. After a few minutes they flicked up, announced one

after another. Nothing. Will checked the local news for Georgia on his laptop. Nothing. Jack was keeping it quiet, Will thought with a frown, but why?

Suddenly ten am seemed too far away. Which was when the howling started.

Seven hours in total. Will couldn't attest to the fact, as he only lasted five, but when he woke up a couple of hours later, cramped into an uncomfortable sitting position outside the door to the utility room, everything was over.

"Seven," Will counted them again, just to make sure, "seven of you. Alright," he sat back on his haunches and couldn't help smiling at the wriggling sight of seven blind, deaf newborn pups searching desperately for their mother's breast, "well done girl," he smiled; Frank, exhaustedly lying on her side, flicked her eyes to him before returning her head to the ground with a huff of air.

Can't just carry on like this. The thought made him frown, lower his eyes to the ground. He stood up, sliding the knots from his muscles, the clicks from his joints. Will listed in his head as he watched the newborns squirm and paw sightlessly, sniffing out their instinctual need.

New life should be a reminder, shouldn't it? he asked himself. So fucking philosophical, he scoffed in return. But the puppies still wriggled and the world still turned outside and, despite everything that he had become, nothing would change that. Will stared. Seven new reasons to be responsible, seven new reasons why he needed his job, seven new reasons why he liked life, seven new reasons to be...

The word sprang to mind but was frowned at. Will sniffed, smelling faint blood, the strong smell of musk and a heady scent of afterbirth. It seemed unfair to think it but, with the way his world had been turning, Will knew it was warranted.

It's not warranted, he wanted to argue. The words stuck in his throat. He swallowed them down. Hannibal would have berated him for even thinking it. *Everyone is a little unhinged Will,* he would say, *it is alright to be weird.* Will closed his eyes and rubbed at his eyelids, forcing himself to say the words that everyone but Lecter would want to hear.

Seven new reasons to be normal.

Chilton's face was always present at the start. The dream was forgetful and yet it cut at him, knife like. Left marks. *The room was quiet but for his own fear. Not the usual kind, not the heart beating faster, not the sweat upon the back of his neck. A fear of everything crumbling away, breaking down. A fear of becoming one when before there had been two.*

Do you remember me?

Don't ask impossible things. Impossible things are only made to mock. *The man in the doorway did not smile. He watched; detached, interested.*

(Faded, all faded. Outline in black ink, see the detail in the pale faces.)

What a stroke of luck, the inkwell is empty. *A book in his hand. It falls with a loud, hard sound against the floorboards.*

You have to see, you are made to see. In his eyes, isn't it? I am there. Colour it in, keep within the lines.

I can't. You know I can't. I never could. How many? How many was it?

(Many more than Garret Jacob Hobbs.)

Please don't lie to me. *Please*.

The knife slides inside like (ask the question and I'll give you the answer)...*like warm butter*...I would feel, *feel it*, everything. I would feel everything and see the light leave his eyes. *This is what you get, you fucking shit, you liar, you* lied to me. (Don't expect what I cannot give) *I needed you, I* need *you and you stole my days away from me, my mind, the life I was supposed to*...and the mouth would not gape open, but remain as that cold smile, the eyes trained on me with calculated dispassion. (Do you see me now?) *You liar, you fucking liar. Look what you've done! Why, tell me* why you did it*!*

William...

He awoke at dawn, familiarly sweat soaked. Yet his brow did not burn and his eyes were not blood shot and he did not feel the nausea rising up his gullet, desperate to escape. Instead the dream appeared to be the only culprit, sneaking around his subconscious even as it slowly disintegrated the more he tried to grab at it.

By the time he'd showered and dried his hair it was gone, as if it had never been.

The itchy, uneasy feeling stuck with him as he ate his breakfast, as he searched for his glasses and tried to find his keys. Why are you doing this to yourself? he asked bluntly. Did you escape the lion's den only to realise you can't stand the sunlight outside? Crawford trapped you and now you're taking any scrap of a chance that you'll be pulled back in. Make it look like they fought you for it, that right? So you won't look weak. I don't need this, he tried to tell himself, I don't *need* it.

Did you miss me? the lips at his shoulder smiled, hot breath at his ear. Will shivered and tried to ignore them as if they were truly there.

It had seemed prophetic somehow, returning to his spot in the Quantico car park. '***W. Graham'*** it read, as if a name on a concrete block could secure your life. Will felt as if it mocked him instead.

Jack had emailed him photographs, evidence reports, autopsy reports, the works. Somehow Will felt as if he were being groomed. The thought made him grimly humorous. *You could just not look*, he told himself, *you could just not go at all*. The thought was laughable purely for how unviable it was. He was a singed-wing moth to a flame and no amount of burning appeared to keep him at bay. The crime scene revolved in his head like a grisly carrousel. Will hadn't been able to force it from his mind since he had formed the picture of it the night before, photograph like, spinning and spinning.

He was just glad he could walk through the halls of Quantico unaided this time, or almost unaided. The walking stick was now all that was left of his props. Dr. Elaine Barber had forced him back in for a review session and things had been rather terse. Will knew she didn't like him and the dislike transferred; he didn't do much to stop it.

"You should have been up and about on your own weeks ago," she'd argued.

"I am 'up and about'," he knew he'd laden on the sarcasm as her eyes narrowed behind her glasses, "I need the crutches."

"They're becoming a mental crutch, not just a physical," she warned.

"Tell that to my leg when I have to pull into the hard shoulder twice on the way home just to stop from crashing my damn car."

"Are you doing your exercises at home?"

"I don't need to, I get about just fine."

"Then if you get about just fine, why do you need the crutches?"

"I didn't realise you were a psychiatrist too."

"I'm changing your therapy," she said with a tight smile and hard eyes, "no more crutches. You can have a standard walking stick until you work out the kinks in your balance, everyone's always a bit uncoordinated coming off crutches. And Will?"

He had sighed, staring at her chin.

"Do try and be more positive."

He took it as a personal victory that he hadn't said the three little words resting just behind his lips. He had left with the walking stick and a sense of being forced to get better. Somehow the thought was disturbing more than the idea of being truly back to normal. Back to normal. *He had contemplated, as he hobbled down the hospital corridor, if there was even a normal to get back to.*

And now he was about to find out.

Descent: that's what he would call it. A slow elevator ride down, a slow walk along the linear, sterile corridors which seemed, mentally, to slope towards the depths. No one was there to greet him at the doors, no gatekeeper demanding a libation. Instead he found his world shifting backwards, rewinding to a time before the shadows had swallowed him.

Two flip swings and the doors flapped closed behind him, revealing the dreamlike image of the white sheet over shining steel, tented by the unseen shape of a body. Will walked forwards carefully, the walking stick adding an unfamiliar third thump to his footsteps.

Don't look under the tree for the presents, the thought came unbidden, *it's greedy*.

A hard smile. His hand hesitated only once, twitching fingers in the air, before it grabbed a fistful of white. One hand shifted the cloth, pulling it back to reveal a feast of desecration. Will breathed in the base stump of the neck, top of the vertebral column revealed like a split pearl, the limbless,

red-ended shoulders, the missing legs, the removed genitalia. A piecemeal offering which made Will's heart triple-beat with anticipation. Of what, he was yet to understand.

Dear god, he thought as he observed the surgical precision of the cuts, resisting the want to reach out and run his fingers over the flesh to gauge its smoothness. He's taunting them. This show of power while they are impotent to acknowledge it, acknowledge that he even lives. *I see you*. He closed his eyes and licked his lips.

A small man in a large world with a beautiful purpose not fully realised. To help him see by being seen was perhaps only half of the victory. Something brutal would fit this pour soul's purpose, but something full of the artistry he was famed for. No need to get sloppy. That would be simply uncouth. Looking up was elementary, over the body, over the sheet, over the shining slab. The Chesapeake Ripper smiled back with white teeth beneath black antlers.

"I see you can't keep a bloodhound from a scent."

Will did not turn because he did not need to. He wished the stag would leave but, even as Jack's footsteps walked into the room and the door thudded shut, the vision remained like a spectre. He forced his hand to drop its grip on the sheet and leaned back on his stick. The room seemed to shift, transmute from the savoury, intense expectation he'd tasted while alone, to the guilt Jack brought by forcing his associations out into civil company.

Shouldn't be excited, should you? black lips asked.

"It's him," was all Will could say.

"I thought you'd see it."

"I'm surprised you're not leaping on the obvious denial Purnell had built a few weeks ago."

"No point in nay saying something for ego's sake. I think I'm pushing past the need for things to make sense anymore."

"That," Will said as he began to slowly walk around the dismembered corpse, "is a good place to be," Will counted five packets on the opposite slab, two arms, two legs, another for smaller things; there was one missing, "Where's the head?"

"Never found it."

"Mmm."

"Come on Will, I didn't bring you here for vagaries. You're normally straight to the point."

"Then why did you bring me..?"

He would have finished, but the door opened to reveal a reason not to. Beverly walked in, giving Will a savvy glance, followed by Price and Zeller talking in hushed voices. The man at the tail end proceeded to watch him from the moment they were within eye line. The need to look away could not be obeyed, simply because Will wasn't sure he entirely wanted to, for one reason or another. Will could feel the frown tainting his brow. Right now Will was choosing 'another'.

"Ah, a pleasant surprise," Hannibal said, a small polite smile affixed to his face, "it has been a while since I had any of those."

“Maybe I can extend your wait a little longer,” Will said bluntly, ignoring Hannibal and turning back to Jack; the man had a small, interested frown on his face, “you didn’t answer my question.”

“...You know why I brought you here.”

“Yes, but I don’t know what you want me to do about it.”

“Don’t be stubborn, Will. I’d hoped we could be professional.”

“Oh, so I’m allowed to be professional now? What happened to being suspended on a therapy license? Not enough to keep the wolves at bay?”

“Right now you’re not a reinstated employee,” Jack said, “you’re a professional consultant.”

The laugh was almost involuntary. Will barked it out, then waved a hand to try and brush away Jack’s ruffled feathers. Everyone but Hannibal was wise enough to be looking elsewhere. Will could see him out the corner of his eye, a small, almost invisible smile gracing his lips.

Will tried to be diplomatic, to apologise and move on, but somehow Hannibal’s disquieting presence made him profusely reckless.

“Does that come with a pay rise?”

“It comes with not being escorted out of the building by security,” Jack answered soberly.

“Oh, well at least there are perks.”

“This was a...”

Mistake, *misjudgement, waste of time.* Will knew what the missing words should be even before Jack had deigned to utter them. He knew it because of the tone, the sheer frustration laced with disappointment that seemed to pervade Jack Crawford’s voice as soon as he wasn’t getting his way. Will knew it, so much so that it made him want to shift from uneasy and inappropriate humour to outright cold, hard malice. The turn was so fierce and swift that Will felt sick with the realisation that he was capable of it.

Yet it was worse, somehow worse, considering he did not lash out. Before, he remembered, he would have boiled over rather than simmered. If there was hot anger then Will acted on that anger before regretting it. *You were ill*, he rationalised, *you couldn’t control it.* And now? He asked himself. There was an answer, he knew there was, he simply did not wish to believe in its existence.

“We know who he is?” he asked, interrupting.

“Graeme Lehrwood,” Price said quickly, picking up a clipboard from behind him; he flipped a few pages, scanning them with sharp eyes before handing it to Will, “he was a fireman, thirty five years old, no previous criminal record, no history of mental illness.”

“Until we do a full autopsy and scan,” Zeller added, “we’re just assuming he snapped.”

The pages and black ink letters skipped before his eyes. Will read them, left to right, left to right, pulling in the tested waters. Slip your hand in and feel it. The man on the slab began to fill up the shape Will had made for him, like plaster poured into the mould. Married, no children. *Couldn’t*

have them perhaps? Or didn't want them? A fireman for fifteen years but no sign of promotion. *Too unstable, something off, something that made people wary*. Both parents dead, no siblings. *Alone from before he could remember what being alone was.* Not poor but not rich, reasonable car, reasonable house, reasonable life. *Reasonable that he would realise one day that everything was just a filmy cover for the lies polluting underneath.*

The page flipped to a set of smiling pictures. Lehrwood stared up at Will with a bright smile of teeth and eyes that crinkled at the edges. *Don't hide from me*. *I see you*. Beside him was a woman of similar age, a closed lipped smile upon her face, her eyes older than they should be. He felt a resentment for her, even as he hated himself for it. *Couldn't help me, could you? Couldn't save yourself from me.*

"I think I know who your missing first victim is," Will said quietly, handing the clipboard to Jack.

"Yeah, we'd gathered as much. Still no sign of her but we're looking."

"Having an affair with the headless car park corpse, I'd put money on it. Could have been the stresser. But you'll find old bruising on her body, broken bones long healed."

"Domestic violence?" Beverly asked, "He doesn't seem the type."

"The badly abused tend to perpetuate the rule," Will said, taking a deep breath, letting it out slowly, "he didn't want to, the anger it just..."

...it just happened.

Slipping inside was easy, easier than it should have been. The pendulum did not swing, the room did not change, the players remained in their parts, the limbs remained separate from the inert body at their centre. Will Graham stood in the autopsy room of the Forensics Unit in the heart of the FBI in Baltimore and let his mouth talk for another. It was only afterwards that he realised it was not Graeme Lehrwood who emerged, or why he'd always known it would be a truly bad idea to do this with an audience.

"I'd been watching him for longer than he realised," Will started, frowning, "and he'd realised. Because you didn't find anything in the tox report, right Brian?"

"Yeah," Zeller answered slowly; Will did not miss the concerned glance he and Price shared, "it was clean."

"Which means I didn't drug him, I didn't manipulate him physically. And the left and right arm show signs of coagulation, as do parts of the left leg," Will continued, picking up the preliminary coroner's report; the room seemed to slip a little, grow a little darker, phasing out faces, narrowing down to tunnel vision, "not because I forced him to, there were no ligature marks on the limbs, the neck. I wouldn't have had anything to hold over him, no parents, no friends, no significant money, no kids."

Will frowned, before the expression gave way to calm acceptance.

"He wanted this to happen," he said with a pitying lilt to his tone, "or did I talk him into it? I could have, I'm sure. He agreed to meet me, because surely there was no other way I could have found him in such a convenient place. Which means I knew who he was, and to some extent he perhaps knew who I was. And he came anyway. Yes, he wanted this."

As close as he could come without touching, Will reached out his gloveless hand and laid his fingertips gently on the rim of the cold, steel slab. His voice had gentled, as if talking to himself, so much so that he forced himself to speak up.

“I gave him his release. The arms first because he detested them the most. He would have asked, a request. It’s only polite, isn’t it? To fulfil a last request? The area was secluded but not so much that I didn’t have to gag him. Were there cotton fibres found caught in his molars? Beverly?”

He looked up, finding her watching him steadily; a few second’s hesitation, then she spoke.

"I don't know," she said, making Will frown, "we didn't recover the head."

“Right," Will cleared his throat; the thought had come naturally, it was obvious, wasn't it? He carried on quickly, "I would have gagged him because he was alive while I did it,” thick, hot, elation at the thought; a new experience, surely. Not many would beg for such an exotic poison, “Alive until he died from the blood loss, or perhaps the shock. He wanted the punishment, he thought he deserved it because he’d had to do what he did, he had to kill the sinners and the sinned, *release*, but it was still a sin. He was still a monster. He saw me, a redeemer. Yes, that’s what I am to him. I...I could make him into an angel again.”

Jack picked the wrong moment to clear his throat, and Will’s glazed eyes wandered to him; he smiled a little lopsidedly. They must feel so lost, he thought another’s thoughts, all wrapped up in a blissful bubble.

“Oh,” Will started, “don’t worry, I didn’t do this just for him. It’s a present, surely even you can see that? It’s a love letter, all tied up in plastic sheets. Still too irrational, it says, to see what’s before your very eyes. How does it go? Marlowe. ‘*Fools that will laugh on earth, most weep in hell*’. Daring you to say it is not what it is, what it *clearly* is. Daring you to give my work to another’s name just to keep the hysteria at bay,” Will licked his lips and sniffed, blinking rapidly as the world seemed to vibrate slightly at the edges; the shadows receded and he rubbed at the back of his neck with his left hand, “daring you to say this is anyone but the Chesapeake Ripper.”

He wished it were any but Hannibal who broke the silence that followed. Now he felt forced to begrudgingly thank him for his distraction.

“Well,” he said, looking at the body with an air of mild curiosity, “that was certainly educational.”

“I’m glad someone appreciated it,” Will found himself saying with a deprecating quirk to his lips; he turned his head jerkily to Crawford, keeping his eyes focused on the man’s shirt collar. The words would not come. He felt a rising elation in his throat that wanted to make itself known. He couldn’t, it would be wrong to, it would be far worse to let them all know just what he was and just what he could become at a moment’s notice. Will turned without warning and left.

There was no resistance to be met with, until the doors flopped shut and he was suddenly alone once more. *Only not alone, never truly alone.* The grinning lips followed him and Will, for once, felt like turning and demanding they tell him why, *why.* Will swallowed and dug around agitatedly for his glasses, pulling them out and cleaning them as he leaned against the corridor wall. He licked his lips as if to try and rid them of the anticipation still humming through the sensitive flesh. He slid them on as the doors opened and closed behind him; a smoke screen on the battlefield.

“An unfortunate display,” Hannibal said, adjusting his coat cuff, “yet an entirely plausible one. Tell me, were you always apt to be such a flagrant exhibitionist or is this a recent development?”

“Why are you here?”

“Answering questions with questions. It seems I have left an impression on you after all. I am here at Jack’s request.”

“Why are you really here?”

“If I wished to lie to you, Will, I would have said I was here to steal meat from the morgue,” Hannibal smiled, eyes crinkling; Will felt the need to touch him and berated himself for it, looking away, “Jack asked if I would attend, in the off chance that you did not turn up.”

“Good to know I’m still considered reliable,” Will ground his teeth as he found himself falling simply back into the easiness that was ‘talking to Hannibal’; he blinked rapidly five times, “I don’t think I’ll be much good here right now. Best you stay, I...” he hadn’t been sure how best to finish. Instead he simply pushed up from the wall and made to leave.

Hannibal had opened his mouth to speak when the door opened once more. Jack did not look happy but then Will hadn’t expected him to; only he didn’t look angry either. Will stalled, staring at the corridor wall opposite. There was a moment of silence. Jack glanced at Hannibal who gave an almost imperceptible shake of the head. Will felt the hand around his walking stick tighten on instinct.

“If you’re trying to tell whether I’m crazy or not,” Will bit out, forcing his eyes to Jack’s, “do it yourself. Don’t bandy me about like some broken toy, passing me around to all your friends. *You* asked me here.”

“And I’ll admit I wasn’t sure what I’d get,” Jack sighed.

“He’s not here in case I didn’t show, you *knew* I’d come,” Will said, his voice raising tightly, “you asked him here to fucking *profile me.* Suppose I shouldn’t be surprised by now, should I? Has there been a single moment since you hauled me back through those doors that you actually *trusted me* Jack?”

“Agent Crawford merely...” Hannibal began.

“You stay out of this,” Will snapped; he could see Jack was surprised. Will was sure he had never raised his voice to Hannibal in public since they had met, “if you want my help don’t bring me here under false pretences, don’t give me placating titles, don’t tiptoe around me like a bunch of poachers, just damn well *let me do my job!*”

There was a tired feeling in his limbs when he realised his heart was beating too fast. Will slowed his breathing, forcing it through his nose as he kept his mouth tight shut. His eyes itched. He rubbed at them harshly under his glasses before letting them drop back to his nose.

“I don’t want to let you do your job Will,” Jack said, making Will look to him sharply, “I *need* you to do your job. And to do that I need to know you are capable of doing it without...” he hesitated briefly, but long enough for Will.

“Without ending up beating someone’s teeth down their throat, I get it,” Will said acidly.

“Well I hope you do,” Jack said; he glanced at Hannibal, standing by patiently and demurely as always, “because Dr. Lecter will be supervising you *and*,” he said as Will made to open his mouth,

“there are no buts, no protests, no what ifs. This is the way it is or it isn’t at all and, right now, I don’t want to hear that. You understand me?”

Hannibal was pulling off his leather gloves, one finger at a time. Will watched him, focusing on the systematic, orderly and symmetrical fashion in which he did so. *You’re here because you have to be*, he told himself, *don’t lie, you want this, more than anything*. He licked his lips again and nodded absently. He heard Jack sigh through his nose and forced himself to verbalise his agreement.

“Yes,” he said quietly, “I get it. I’ll play nice.”

“And I need to know you can look at this and no more than that.”

“Now you’re asking a lot.”

“You’re not delusional anymore Will, there should be no fuzzy line. I need to know you can stay separate. You ought to know this whole situation is a damn powder keg. The last thing I need is to bring in a lit match.”

“I can make myself look,” Will said, unable to stop the swallow and the pause, “but the thinking is...shutting down. If you want me to...uhm, follow it I can. Just don’t be surprised.”

“Surprised?” Jack asked.

The gloves appeared momentarily forgotten as Lecter listened without watching, his eyes fixed on his paused task. Will rolled his right shoulder to relieve the strain there from leaning on his stick. Hannibal, out of Jack’s line of sight, smiled.

“Yeah,” Will said, unable to look away as Hannibal once more continued with his task, “surprised. Don’t be.”

“Why are you really here?”

There wasn’t a feeling of being a broken record, mainly because every time he asked there was a subtle change. Hannibal walked with him as their group made their way to Trace, and Will felt it as a shadow at his footsteps. Everyone else had filtered apart, but Hannibal was by his side. The subtle changes fluttered around, even as no one spoke. Will felt as if he were walking in someone else’s skin, quivering with a nervous energy he hadn’t felt in weeks. There was a distinct and worrying need to do something foolish, itching in his fingers.

Get a hold of yourself. This is why you let him go, isn’t it? *Not really*. It’s part of why I need him. *Don’t do this to yourself.*

Worst of all, Will thought, Hannibal’s words did not lie; they subverted. Far more difficult to trap something smoky and ethereal rather than a concrete falsity. That Lecter was entirely accommodating with every answer was also irritating.

“Besides obliging Agent Crawford, I am here to pick up the last of my belongings.”

No need to ask in words. Will gave Hannibal a curious askance glance; the man continued without missing a beat.

“Four suits,” Hannibal elaborated, “an antique surgical kit, family heirloom, and a handful of other objects and delicacies.”

“You’re being investigated,” Will mumbled out, “what for?”

“Was being investigated,” he clarified, “for being the Chesapeake Ripper,” Will kept his eyes forwards, his walking stick swinging rhythmically at his side, “When I informed Jack of Mr. Sutcliffe's oddities, of course Donald returned my accusations, and as you can understand the FBI did what they must.”

“Yeah,” Will said, unable to lose the frown; memories of Bressinden, of agents ferreting through his house for clues to a murder he did not commit, “I guess I know all about that. Surprised it’s taken this long to return everything.”

“When Donald was found to be irreparably guilty, let’s say my line of the investigation was put on hold. I was perfectly understanding, of course. Only a mild inconvenience.”

“Then...”

A muted ring had Will stop in his tracks, fishing with his free hand in his pocket. The name on the phone’s display mocked him. He cursed under his breath.

“I’ll catch up in a minute,” he said to Jack as he walked past.

Will was more than aware that Hannibal had stopped walking. He carried on regardless while the phone revealed an abrasive voice.

“I feel I must take a missed appointment as a breach of your contract,” Chilton sounded simultaneously put-out and smug.

“I was called in, something important,” Will didn’t feel he should have to explain himself, “look, can’t we just change the time?”

“If you think I have nothing better to do than proffer to your whims, Mr Graham, you are sadly mistaken.”

“I should have known this would end up difficult. Make me another appointment.”

“Do I have an assurance that something bright and shiny will not distract you from it?”

“Do I ever get any reassurances that you won’t be a complete imbecile?” oh that will go down well, Graham, won’t it? he thought, What’s wrong with you?

“This is not something that I should have to put up with,” Chilton spat, “and I don’t see why...”

“Then don’t put up with it,” Will said tightly, catching Hannibal out the corner of his eye; he turned to the man and realised he had his arm extended, hand offered, “I...”

A moment’s hesitation, overruled swiftly by an instinctual and overriding familiarity. The phone was handed over, less than an offering but more than just sheer disregard. Will watched with curiosity as Lecter brought the phone to his ear and began to speak. Will could almost hear Chilton’s uptight, reserved tone coming back into play. *Oh, good morning Hannibal*, he would say, *I didn’t realise you were...*

By the time the phone was returned, voice dead and concealed once again in the inner pocket of his jacket, Hannibal's expression had not changed. Still serene, seeming only mildly interested in his surroundings. He spoke only as they once more began to walk.

"Thursday," Hannibal said, "at three o'clock. Apparently he can fit you into his tight schedule."

"Thought he might," Will said; the threat of Hannibal coming between Chilton and his star patient would be all too much of an incentive to obey, "I suppose you expect some sort of thanks."

"I only expect what you might give me," Hannibal said, "and truthfully I can never even fully expect that."

"Meaning?" he asked, feeling a distinct giddy recklessness sliding around inside of him.

"You are wonderfully unpredictable," Hannibal smiled, his eyes joining in the venture, "such as with Matthew? I am sure I remember the name correctly."

"I'm not doing this here."

"And what would we be doing?"

"I doubt it has a savoury name that you would approve of."

"I feel I should warn you against this dalliance, only you would probably misunderstand my doing so."

"That seems a likely outcome."

"I have heard he is rather the violent type," Hannibal said, "Chilton's employee, yes?" Will refused to be drawn in to asking how Hannibal even knew, "Partly unhinged, to use a crass term. Hardly someone I would recommend."

"Good thing I didn't ask for your recommendation."

"I would hate to see you hurt, Will."

"Liar."

"Never at your expense," Hannibal did not deny the label, merely qualified it, "Would you think so of me?"

Answer it, his mind demanded madly. His mouth would not respond, but his imagination was only too happy to step in. Will didn't bother to think about what he was doing. The thoughts came heavy and fast, the illusion almost real if he were to close his eyes and let it run its course.

He would have dropped the cane to the floor because it was only in the way. Grab two fistfuls of heavy overcoat and pull Hannibal roughly toward him as if to threaten. Only the mouth he would find beneath his would be willing, and he would be slid up against the nearest wall, hands at the small of his back pulling him close.

His shoulders would be pressed against the wall while a tongue was slipped between his lips to taste the trembling bud inside of him, waiting to blossom into a full repertoire of complete and

resplendent anarchy. His finger's twitched. He knew a part of him turned away in disgust. *Only when you're unpredictable*.

The image broke at his request. Will leaned his head back against the coolness of the wall, realising that at some point he had moved without his noticing. He watched through half lidded eyes as he swallowed. Hannibal had not moved nor reacted to Will's sudden quiet, yet the familiar glint of hunger in his eyes spoke otherwise. Will licked his lips and found he couldn't hold the stare, looking down to his left, blinking.

"And so delightfully innocent," Hannibal said, amused.

"You have a skewed sense of naivety, doctor."

"Perhaps, although I like to think I have a clear picture of you, Will."

"Then I wouldn't be unpredictable," Will said, turning to walk away, his heart hammering in his chest and his mind running doubly fast, *what are you doing, what* was *that, what in the fuck are you doing?* "would I."

"No," he heard Hannibal say, "you would not."

"Well you're sure in a cheery mood this morning," Matthew said sarcastically after Will snipped out a curt *'what?'* in answer to the shrill ringing of his mobile, "get outta the wrong side of bed?"

The next morning had not brought any of the forgetfulness Will had hoped for. His dreams had been a mixed bag of good memories gone sour. He had awoken with the feeling of long fingers tracing his abdomen, sharp eyes regarding him from just over his shoulder as lips caressed his neck. The unwanted erection was something he'd disposed of in the shower, trying his best not to think of the unbidden images which had caused it in the first place.

The phone call was both wanted and unwanted. He wasn't sure how to deal with the duplicity.

"Both sides are the wrong side," Will said, holding the phone in the crook of his shoulder as he sat on the floor and gave Lady her ear drops; the dog squirmed and Will brought his legs up to stop her escape.

"You're not giving me much to work with here. I'm trying to cheer you up."

"Good luck with that."

"Do I need to get you drunk again?"

"Oh so that's how it is. And here I thought you weren't just after one thing."

"I was kidding."

"No, you weren't."

"You don't trust anyone, huh?"

“Look, I’ve got a lot to do today Matthew, if you don’t mind getting to the point.”

“Ok,” the voice seemed more amused by his snappishness than put off by it, “then are you free at twelve?”

“For what?”

“It’s a surprise, I can’t tell you. Are you free?”

“I don’t like surprises.”

“That’s a real shocker,” Matthew drawled, “are you free at twelve or not?”

“I don’t know,” Will bit out, “look, I’m not really in the mood to be dragged off to some unknown place to have some unknown thing happen to me. Not today, alright?”

“*Alright*,” Matthew almost comically backed-off, “yeesh. You’d think I was asking you to walk across hot coals or somethin’.”

“Just had a bad morning,” Will ground out, “and...yes, I’m always more agreeable when I’m drunk. Welcome to how I am the other ninety five percent of my life.”

“Ninety five percent sober? Wow, you need to loosen up.”

“My father was an alcoholic, what can I say.”

“Shit,” Matthew backpedalled and, despite the seriousness of their conversation, Will couldn’t help but smile at the effect, “I didn’t mean that you should...I mean that you already know how to have a drink and a good time so...fuck. Can we just forget I ever brought that up?”

The laugh was almost involuntary. Will took the phone from his shoulder and held it to his ear as Lady danced off, shaking her head roughly. Will leaned back against the doorframe. He stared up at the window, at the blanket of white cloud reflecting the world below.

This is what normal people do, he thought to himself. Normal people feel at home flirting and going on day trips and fucking and going to work and moving in together and having two point five kids.

Yet the sweet song on the string between you still sings, does it not? And you’ve felt far more at home standing by a dead body with him as your minds work together than you ever have holding someone else’s hand.

“Sure,” Will said, his tone far colder than he’d expected it to be.

“Right, well, then I guess I’d better make my exit before I stick my other foot right in my mouth with the first...”

“I’m free at twelve,” Will said, practically interrupting; the words had been difficult to voice, enough that when they emerged it was as if from a gun. *This is what normal people do. You can’t cling to the other.*

“You don’t have to...”

“No, I’m free.”

“Ok then that’s, well, great,” Matthew sounded pleased with himself and Will shook his head, “then when should I pick you up? It’s in Medfield, how far are you from there?”

“Or I can just meet you,” Will said hurriedly; the idea of giving away his bastion of privacy was sudden and jarring. So far they’d only ever gone back to Matthew’s apartment and Will had kept his life separate.

“Wouldn’t be much of a surprise then, would it?” Matthew pointed out, “Don’t worry, I’ve got an extra helmet.”

“You want me on that bike again, you’re going to have to do a lot more than ask nicely.”

“Don’t start. What’s the problem now?”

“Nothing, for you,” Will said, “but for me I think it’ll look less like a life choice and more like a mid-life crisis.”

“For cryin’ out loud,” Matthew’s voice was breathy with laughter, “there’s just no winning with you. Well, then we can take your car. Happy?”

“Can you drive stick?”

“Yes I can drive stick,” Matthew practically sing-songed, “heck, who owns a stick shift nowadays?”

“I do,” Will said as he looked down at his knees.

“Shoulda seen it coming really. Now tell me where to come meet you cause I’ve got stuff to sort if this is gonna happen.”

“I’ll come to yours,” Will said, “we can go from there. What time?”

“Uh, twenty to twelve. Takes about fifteen minutes.”

“Alright,” Will said, nodding to no one, “I guess I’ll see you then.”

The house became quiet once the phone clicked dead. Will leaned his head back against the wall and wondered, briefly, why he was trying to squash his triangle-self through the square shaped slot. The edges and corners fought with each other. The phone was placed back in its holder to charge while Will grabbed his jacket and keys and shouted a familiar word out into the quiet.

“Post!”

The scampering of paws was loud enough to make him smile. It did every time. He watched as the wave of fur rounded the corner from the living room to the hallway, navigating the table and the sofa until they were padding around his feet, circling. Lenny had been first, followed by an unidentifiable mass of tongues and barks.

“Ah Lenny, you’re always first,” Will said, rubbing the dog’s head roughly, “come on Winston, you haven’t been in a while yeah?”

Will put on Winston's lead and left him by the doorway. They all followed him regardless of his attempts to impose order. *A memory of straight paws all in a row, watching the man before them with effortless obedience and respect.* Will frowned as he opened the spare room, usually filled with spare parts and engine oil, and wondered why he felt that order was something he wanted in his life. *Hannibal was smiling as he handed over the treat.*

"Hey Frankie," Will said as the big dog looked up with doleful eyes; beside her the puppies were fast asleep in a hotch-potch pile of legs, ears and paws. He sat down next to her on the duvet, the floor covered in random off cuts and mats he'd had lying around in the barn, "you doing ok?"

She continued to lay on her side and look exhausted. Will reached out to stroke her head and was given a paw over his wrist for his troubles. He couldn't help but smile, even as he took the hint. When he looked up he found Winston standing in the doorway, ears perked, leash trailing behind him, tail wagging softly. *Is this the normal you were looking for?*

"You look after those pups while I'm gone, y'hear?" he said softly, smiling.

Winston stuck his head out of the passenger seat window while they drove. It was a frozen day, but Will didn't complain. Hat on, gloves tight, jacket zipped up to his throat. The landscape surrounded them like a lover under the blankets; held tightly and possessively. Will was sure that he would never be as happy as when he was here.

The bright, brick post office in Merrifield was only just opening when he pulled in. Winston jumped from the car and stayed put, sniffing the air and watching three women going into the bridal shop next door. The clouds had become a deep, steel grey as he drove, threatening rain. Will pocketed his keys and picked up Winston's leash, leading him inside.

The office was quiet, the sound of vague voices from the back. Winston licked his mouth noisily and began wandering, pulling at his lead to sniff at a tall stand filled with driving instruction booklets. Will walked to the counter and rang the bell. He was glad when the face that appeared was one he recognised.

"Hey Will," Harry Bedford said in his usual slow, lazy tone, his blue eyes seeming far younger than his grey hair and liver spotted skin allowed, "you got yer key?"

"Yeah," Will said, handing it over quickly, dropping it into the old man's palm so as to avoid contact.

"And hello there Winston," Harry said, a juddering smile gracing his thin lips; Winston perked up on hearing his name. He jumped up on his front paws when Harry dug around in his pocket and threw him a biscuit.

"You're spoiled," Will said once Harry was out of earshot, "you know that?"

Crunching was his only answer. Will shook his head and waited. More voices from the back. He stared out of the window, watching the inactivity. Everything seemed very still. He didn't startle when Harry spoke suddenly from behind him, instead turning slowly and looking at the small pile.

"Y'know we could just deliver all this to ya," Harry said, as he always did, "save you the trip."

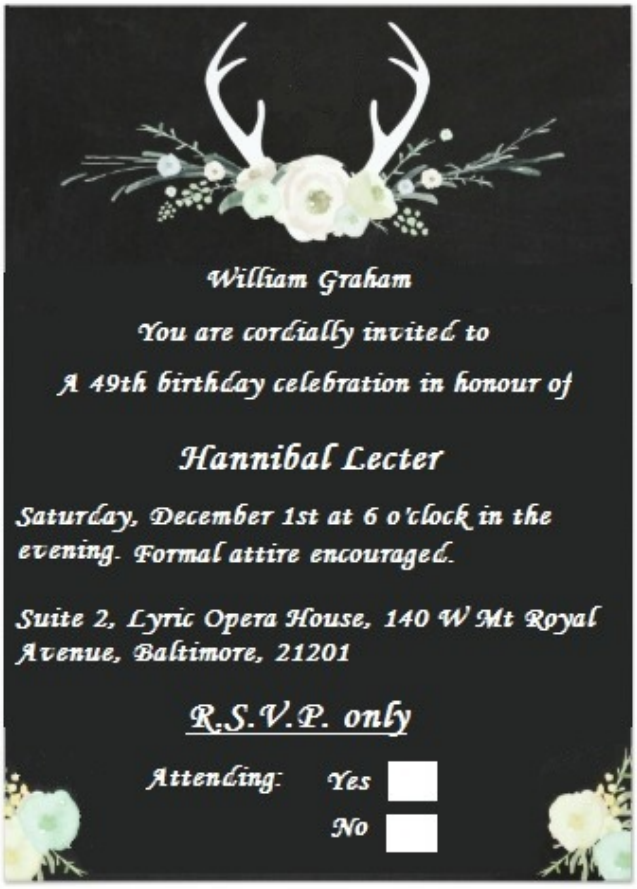
"Thanks Harry," Will said, keeping his eyes on his mail.

“Suit yerself.”

The post box was safer, always had been. Mail coming to his house only meant someone could find his address with sickening ease. The last time he’d had mail come to his door had been to find disturbing messages from a disturbed individual; one Will later put in jail but, at the time, had known exactly where he was without his knowledge. No, this was far safer. Kept the predators at bay.

But couldn’t stop their messages from filtering through regardless. Will stared at the envelope in his hand, the third down as he leafed through them. Instantly and recognisably different, pompously announcing itself by the heavy GSM Will could feel between his fingertips; luxurious and smooth in texture. Will bit at the inside of his lip while Winston watched a leaf float past, head jerking around as the wind picked it up and tossed it across the parking lot.

It opened easily, the glue coming away simply and leaving little trauma on the paper. Winston barked at nothing. Inside were two cards. He slipped his fingers in between the folds and wedged the paper open. His eyes crept inside, reading the cursive white script at an angle.


William Graham
You are cordially invited to
A 49th birthday celebration in honour of
Hannibal Lecter
Saturday, December 1st at 6 o'clock in the evening. Formal attire encouraged.
Suite 2, Lyric Opera House, 140 W Mt Royal Avenue, Baltimore, 21201
R.S.V.P. only
Attending:
Yes
No

They were pulled out because Will needed to see them in the light of day to believe them. The second was found to be similarly decorated, only with a large ‘Plus One’ blazoned teasingly on the bottom right hand corner. Will closed his eyes slowly and heard Matthew’s voice over the whistling of the wind.

‘*Actually I think you’re the one being rude here. Well, we’ll just have to agree to disagree. You have a good night now.’*

Opening his eyes dispelled the memory, *with its heat and scent of sweat and subtle claustrophobia*, but only allowed the other, the lie, the memory which only existed within his own head, to take over; *the wall against his back, tight heat between them as Hannibal pulled their bodies flush and kissed him as if it were his indelible right.*

Winston sat down and scratched his ear. Will wished he could be more vigilant, keep his suspicion and use it wisely instead of giving in to his slightest whims. *Where’s your control now*? He felt the card between his fingers, the cold biting at them. It was always the time to be most careful, he thought to himself as he looked back down into the envelope, when Hannibal refused to be subtle. The cards were unceremoniously stuffed back into their cage.

Sometimes he felt ready for things. Other times he felt he threw himself out into the void just to see what would happen because he was expected to. Or simply wanted to. *Normal not to have complete control.* Will didn’t see the point. If you could be prepared, why not be? If you couldn’t...

“You going to tell me where we’re going?”

“You going to tell me why you look like someone killed your dog?”

“And ate it.”

“Gotta dark sense of humour, don’t you?”

“Not the first time I’ve been told that. I’m running low on gas by the way.”

“We’ll fill up on the way back.”

It felt odd to be in the passenger seat once more. The same essence of the driver seeming out of place, although Matthew fit more behind the wheel of his beat up Volvo than Hannibal had. Only not in feeling. Will closed his eyes and breathed in, smelling the stuffiness of the heater.

He didn’t strike up further conversation and Matthew didn’t push to break the silence. Will was glad that Matthew had picked up on his evasiveness, or perhaps, he thought, just wasn’t in the mood to start an argument. Will knew that Matthew seemed to find his personality quirky, rather than irritating and aggressive as others did, but he was sure that would only last so long. *Have to slip into the normal, square-hole at some point Graham, or you’ll end up in the nightmare: alone, truly alone. Time to make your choice*.

Still, he couldn’t help but frown when Matthew turned off the I-83 and took a long narrow road lined with trees, leading to a sign which read:

WELCOME TO
THE MARYLAND ZOO
Druid Park Hill

“This is a little surreal,” Will murmured as Matthew turned into the parking lot.

“Surreal how? Never been to the zoo?”

“Oh I‘ve been to the zoo,” Will said, unbuckling his seatbelt, “I’ve just never been on a date before.”

“Who said this was a date?” Matthew asked, eyebrow raised.

“No one needed to.”

“You’re incorrigible, you know that?”

“And that’s the nicest way anyone’s ever put that,” Will’s mouth flickered to a smile.

“Come on,” Matthew turned off the engine and unbuckled himself, “if it’s any consolation, this isn’t the surprise.”

When they didn’t head straight for the entrance, already filling up with visitors queuing for tickets, Will didn’t comment. A side entrance, labelled ‘employees only’, let Matthew through with the swipe of a card through a reader. Will followed, unable to help looking around him as if they were breaking in.

He found himself faced with a small pavilion, labelled *Memberships and Registration*, and beyond that the beginnings of a fenced in, scrub-like habitat. Will looked around him critically while Matthew led him forwards, past the pavilion and down towards what looked like a ranger’s station in front of a group of eucalyptus trees, leaves dancing silver in the mild breeze.

“So do you come here often?” Will asked wryly as Matthew pulled out a set of keys and unlocked the door.

“Thought you might like to guess,” Matthew said, smirking, as he stepped inside.

“Sounds too much like work.”

“And here I thought you liked a good mystery,” Matthew said; Will watched him from the doorway as he walked behind a counter in the wooden hut and began browsing a wall-board of hooks with a set of keys upon each. After a quick deliberation Matthew found what he was looking for. He walked back to Will, twirling the keys on his finger, “you know, it’s not that hard. Or it wouldn’t be, if you ever asked me anything beyond ‘could you do that harder’.”

“Jesus Matthew,” Will muttered, turning away to watch the trees and hide his discomfort.

Matthew simply smiled to himself, watching Will closely. Far too smugly for Will’s liking. A distraction, Will thought, at least it would be a distraction.

“You don’t work here,” Will said, looking around at the orderly, clean hut, radiating homeliness, “we didn’t break in, that would have been obvious and you know your way around too well. I doubt you charmed your way to a lifetime pass. So which is it? Friend or family?”

“Aw,” Matthew screwed up his face comically, “you’re no fun. Remind me never to take you to see a thriller at the movies. I’m sure you’d tell me who did it before the opening credits rolled.”

“Family then,” Will said, refusing to be roped in.

“My dad owns the place.”

“*Owns* it?”

“That much of a shock?” Matthew asked as he ushered Will out, closing and locking the door behind them.

“Just thinking that a job at the zoo would be much more pleasant than working for Chilton,” Will shrugged, following Matthew as he led them around the back of the hut, “your dad didn’t offer?”

“Nah. And I’d rather work for Chilton than work for my dad anyway. No need to be beholden to him. Family just makes things complicated, right?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Will said, even as he filed the information away.

The keys turned out to belong to one of three jeeps parked in a locked lot. Matthew swung open the large gate in the fence and drove one out while Will waited; it was painted white and black in zebra stripes, with the Maryland Zoo logo blazoned onto the doors. Matthew helped him in and Will put his walking stick down on the floor beneath the back seats.

“Thought I’d save us the walk,” he said once he’d returned from the locking up the cars, “it’s a bit of a hike through the buffalo yard.”

“Thought I saw signs for a bus,” Will tried to suggest.

“Yeah but it only goes as far as the penguins, then you have to go all the way around the arctic exhibit,” Matthew put his foot down and pulled out onto a road which lay parallel to the visitor paths, “this way I can drive you to the door.”

“No one minds you taking it?”

“There’s two more,” Matthew shrugged, refusing to answer.

Will didn’t push further. The drive was similarly quiet to their previous ride to the zoo itself. Will wondered if Matthew felt as he had earlier: glad for the other’s lack of prying. To an extent their similarities grounded him, yet the differences merely served to remind him of the lack of balance. *This is normal*, he tried to tell himself. The word was beginning to become an anathema, sticking in his throat. *You can be acceptable, it’s not beyond you*.

Not beyond him, no. But clearly beyond everyone else. He frowned, staring at the multitudinous tones of the landscape as it rocked past, from faun to chocolate, clear hooves marking the dust and dirt. Things would have to change, he thought seriously, even as the resentment swelled.

Why, because you’re terrified? The lips asked, *The sickness in your brain was simply a symptom. Who does that leave as the cause?*

He closed his eyes and tried his best to forget the swelling heat as he stood and stared at red raw flesh and plastic wrap and knew that the sole set of eyes which had remained on him throughout had refused to judge him. One thing Hannibal had never asked was that he alter himself.

Eventually, after driving through the extensive, safari-like habitat filled with wandering herds of shaggy, brown buffalo and the occasional patch of gazelle grazing the scrub grass, they arrived at what appeared to be the central hub. To his left Will could see a canopy of swamp trees pushing up

above the tops of the cafes and restrooms, and ahead on his right a large, tellingly white building that surely housed the polar animals. Matthew pulled up to a small bar on a patch of barren ground and turned off the engine. He helped Will down before locking it and pocketing the keys.

“Where now?” Will asked, shading himself from the glaring sun which had decided to finally show itself from behind the clouds.

“It’s just over here, behind the drinks hut. It’s not exactly finished yet, so no one’s allowed in.”

“Great.”

“Don’t worry about it, everyone knows me here. Come on.”

As they approached the building in question Will could tell it wasn’t exactly new, just in the process of being renovated. The small path that led up to it started within eye line of the polar bear exhibit. On that basis it might be expected to be busy, only at the beginning of the path stood a sign which read ‘*NO CHILDREN’*, reinforced further by a chronically bored security guard. Matthew was vilified when the guard nodded them through without another word and went back to staring aimlessly ahead and tapping his feet on the ground.

They walked in silence between artificial rocks planted up with ferns. Then the path opened out, and Matthew hung back to let Will go first.

The cage wasn’t small. Some of the space was an illusion created by painted walls and artfully arranged plants and stone, but in truth there was plenty of space available. A fake rugged cliff with a small waterfall tumbling over the rock into a pool, tall wooden frames with platforms for scrambling up or hiding on top of, even a small cave-like hole in the far left wall for retreating into. Thick glass separated the viewer from the viewed, with a polite notice on a board next to the glass, requesting visitors to stay back behind a makeshift tape barrier.

‘Visitors’ currently meant only them, for which Will was grateful. Other people might have curbed his reaction. As such, in the gloomy arena, smelling of damp vegetation, wood and a faint residue of paint and chemicals, Will allowed himself to walk to the centre of the circular area before the glass and simply stare.

The panther paced across the front of the cage immediately behind the glass. Not the whole width, barely a third of it, in fact. It had worn a path in the grass already, turning each time at precisely the same spot, moving with tightly contained energy that he found painful to watch. It hadn’t been what he’d expected, but only as far as he didn’t understand the significance of a surprise beyond the initial discovery.

Yet he could not stop the thoughts from creeping in as he watched, quick and fast as his associations were without warning. *A sleek grace which lulled and fooled; a terrible, callous stare which was covered and deceivingly gentle only in the face of his seeming benignity.* The panther led him to thoughts of long fingers and cold eyes. That same stare, that same tight, solid control.

Will stood and watched as he heard Matthew walk forwards slowly to join him, standing slightly ahead to his left. Another moment’s silence and then he spoke.

“She came from a zoo in Russia,” Matthew started without prompting, “well, not really a zoo. More a...you know I don’t know what you’d call it. Makes this place look like paradise, or that’s what mom said. She travels, you see. Likes to help out animals all over. Dad says we can’t afford it

but she never listens. Anyway, she found this one in a cage just big enough for her to do that," Matthew pointed to the panther, still obsessively pacing and turning, pacing and turning.

"Then why..?" Will started to ask, even though he figured out the answer half way through asking it.

Will continued regardless, his face set hard, "why is she still doing it?"

A sense of being trapped by that uncommon beauty, that elegance and that latent heat; the constant, lingering threat of being devoured at any moment if he were to let his guard down.

"It's repetitive behaviour," Matthew shrugged, "called stereotyping, I think. This was all she ever experienced, mom said. She arrived in the other place as a young cub, and after that she was always kept alone in the same cage. I guess, after a while, she just stopped reacting to the world around her. There was nothing there that she wanted, but her instinct to move, to be moving, to be free in some way maybe...she just walks. The same way she's always walked."

Will followed the cat with his eyes, watching her sleek, glossy coat and muscles flowing under her skin as she moved. Healthy and beautiful, in the prime of her life, dangerous, so very dangerous and vicious, yet reduced to nothing more than a performing automaton which had been shaped and ruled by the iron bars of her environment, even though they no longer existed.

Yet there were no fetters around Hannibal's arms, no chains around his feet, no mindlessness to his actions, no vacancy to his stare. The man was the panther even as he was not the panther. The same terrifying beauty, the same constant caution, the same restraint, yet for Lecter, Will was sure, the idea of being the reserved, cautious, polite gentleman was only a facade beneath which the true beast lay.

It only took a few steps forwards and lifting the barrier out of the way before Will found himself next to the glass. Matthew didn't protest, and Will was sure he wouldn't have cared if he did, as he reached out and placed his hand against the cold, smooth surface. The panther did not flinch or deviate, even as Will tapped his index finger softly against the glass. *Beautifully savage,* the thoughts came fast but lingered, *and unassumingly dangerous.*

"What will happen to her?" he asked.

"Not sure," Matthew shrugged; Will could feel the other man's eyes on his back, "I mean her stereotyping is pretty deeply ingrained. The damage was done when she was very young, reinforced by years of th'same monotony. I guess you could say she's been driven insane by it. We've had others, not as bad mind, but they were coaxed out of it, could learn new behaviours. Who knows? Maybe one day she'll just...come round."

"Seems..." Will felt his voice trail away, unsure what he was even going to say: *futile, pointless, cruel*. None were appropriate. Eventually he removed his hand from the glass, leaving a handprint outlined in condensation, "hopeful."

"I guess it's all we can be."

"Mmm."

The large cat walked past him again and again. It was a rather intoxicating sight, despite being truly disheartening. Not exactly something someone would pick arbitrarily to show to another. Will

turned to look at Matthew, eyes slightly narrowed.

“So what’s the surprise?”

“Uh,” Matthew frowned even as he smiled, “I thought that would’ve been kinda obvious.”

“Oh?”

“Well no one else is allowed in, so, I thought you’d like to see it.”

“You thought...no,” Will lifted the barrier and moved back to the viewing area, “that’s not it. Why did you bring me here?”

“I just thought you’d want to see it, that’s all.”

Will wondered if he should say the words resting on his tongue, as if awaiting permission to leave: *what kind of fool do you take me for?* Instead he simply said, “Come here.”

Matthew’s frown did not dissipate. He walked forwards without comment until Will was able to take him by the arm, leading him past the barrier until they both stood facing the glass, mere inches away. The panther paced by, gaze fixed inwards, blind to the freedom around her. Will knew what he saw when he looked at those unseeing yellow eyes, the slick repetitive nature, the hidden savagery and the beaten steps. He knew he saw *the elegant line of a long back beneath navy blue material cut to fit*, *as curious eyes turned to regard him over his shoulder and partly quirked lips tested his resolve*.

What he did not know was...

“Tell me what you think,” Will asked softly.

“About what?”

“Don’t toy with me Matthew.”

“I wasn’t...” Matthew licked his lips before sighing, looking down at the cat as it walked past, “I think...that she’s very beautiful. One of the most beautiful things I’ve ever seen, but...”

“You pity her, don’t you.”

“...Yes.”

He couldn’t help but let out a derisive sound as the picture became clearer. All the while he’d been watching the panther pace, seeing flashes of Hannibal in its deceptive nature, Matthew had stood behind him and seen Will in its desperate trap. This is what he sees you as, he thought tightly, this is what everyone sees you as. A vulnerable, wounded animal which encourages pity and draws the eye, yet would be violent enough to kill if a stray hand ever came too close.

He kept his voice low as he replied, the arm around Matthew’s tightening. The anger licked at him, pawing tenderly, enough that he could turn it into something different. Subsumed and used; just as his glasses kept the world at bay, so the idea of being cruel made the world make sense.

“Well more fool you,” he said, leaning in closer until his lips were mere inches from Matthew’s ear; Will could feel the tense energy in him, muscles clenched, “I’ll tell you something, if you were in

there with her, I think she'd stop *stereotyping* pretty damn quickly," Matthew tried to move away but Will kept his hold; not too tight, just tight enough, "she would rip your fucking throat out."

A darting tongue wetted thin lips again, but Matthew couldn't take his eyes from the panther as Will spoke, seeming to follow every graceful lift of a paw and slink of muscle beneath fur.

"That'd teach you not to feel sorry for things that don't need it."

"I guess it would," Matthew said, voice tinged with derision, "not a lesson I'd really be able to learn from though."

"Which is perhaps why you should listen to me instead," Will did not move when Matthew turned in the restrictive hold to face him, "shouldn't you."

It was different, Will could see it. A different hunger. Brown eyes saw something there to recognise, something to vilify their own nature; *a mirror*. Maroon eyes weren't the same; they wanted to possess, to watch and observe, as if like a hunter they were waiting until everything was exactly in place before...

"Is this really what you see," Will asked, unflinching even as Matthew slid his free hand over Will's hip, "when you look at me?"

Matthew looked as if he was considering lying, but smartly changed his mind as Will caught his gaze and held it.

"Occasionally, yeah."

"Trapped and vicious?" Will surmised, "Makes me wonder why you keep picking up your phone."

"Maybe that's not all I see," Matthew rebutted; Will felt his eyes sharpen, his defences flaring. He kept his eyes on Matthew's shoulder, at the seam where his jumper sleeve met the torso.

"When you're strapped to that chair and there're words comin' out of your mouth that'd probably horrify you if you heard them," Will felt the need to tell him to stop but couldn't, Matthew's voice hushing down to a throaty whisper, "And when you lose control and then you come down from that high and your pupils are big as dinner plates, that eager fear, cause it's fear, I see it before you blank it out. Hide it," Will felt the hand at his hip slide up to hold his waist, fingers hard; he swallowed, "and every now and then you do the same when I've got you in my arms, right on the edge, and you seem barely fucking coherent and you stare at me like you might wonder what it'd be like to put your hands around my throat until I stopped breathing."

Somewhere between slipping his arm into Matthew's and now Will realised he'd lost control of the situation. He felt the glass beneath his palm, cold and flat.

"You feel me now, Mister Graham?" Matthew asked quietly, leaning in, leaving mere inches between them, "When I look at you I see a tightly wound spring that's been trained to stay shut. I see it every day, in the ones in their cells who give up. Let society win out as they're *reformed*. It's all bull."

"So now you're telling me you brought me here to inform me that I'm a suppressed lunatic," Will said, face twisting wryly, "points for effort, but I don't think this is how dates are supposed to work."

His lips parted slightly even before Matthew pressed their lips together with subversive gentleness, hiding a hot wire of fervour in the rough nip of teeth and the plunge of tongue. Will let it wash over him, eyes slit open, watching. He fell into a memory and let himself go. He was barely aware of what he was doing until Matthew spoke, once he'd pulled back, breathing heavy, eyes watching him accusingly.

"But now I feel like maybe this isn't the same," he said, not letting go, "like maybe I'm being *compared*."

"To who?"

"Wouldn't I like to know."

"Probably not," Will said; he realised his regained control, smiling, "and I could believe that, or I could decide not to believe that you're as stupid as you're making out to be."

"Fuck you," Matthew said without heat, but not without feeling, "if you wanna fool around what's it to me who you do it with?"

"I don't think you care that he's rich," Will speculated, ignoring him; the fingers tightened, "or that he's successful," a huff of breath and a tip of the head; Will watched, smile turning dangerous, "it's the threat, isn't it. That's really all it is?"

"God, if you could see yourself," Matthew muttered out, leaning his forehead against Will's, "you and those damn eyes will be the death of me. Shit," he grimaced, eyes closed, "do I really gotta compete with Doctor god damned Lecter now? Is that how this is gonna be?"

"Thought you didn't know," Will said, loosening his hold on Matthew's arm, looking away.

"Yeah, well there's no point in lying to *you*, is there?" Matthew shrugged, opening his eyes, "I recognised his voice on the phone. Kinda hard not to."

"Out of curiosity," Will said, pushing Matthew softly back, "what did he say?"

"Oh, a lot of polite bullshit," Matthew took the hint, "which surmounted to 'back the fuck off' when put in layman's terms."

"Sounds about right," Will said softly, shaking his head; he forced his smile not to turn foolish. The thought brought a semblance of himself back to reality. He frowned, looking back over his shoulder at the panther, still moving endlessly back and forth, "can we get out of here?"

"...Sure," Matthew said; they walked out together, the faded sunlight pale but appreciated, "how about I get you dinner? Gotta try and salvage this somehow, right?"

"I've already got food at home," Will said, pushing on without trying to think about it too hard, "why don't I cook you something?"

"At your place?" Matthew asked, eyebrow raised.

"At my place."

"Well, that's an offer I can't refuse. How about a tour before you go, huh? I know all the best spots."

"I'm sure you do," Will couldn't stop the smile, "how many animals am I going to see on this tour?"

Matthew hadn't replied as such, just walked ahead and waited for Will to catch up. The swagger in his step was unmistakable and somewhat amusing. Will laughed softly to himself, even as he wasn't sure he was happy with it.

There should have been a straightforwardness to it. Stopping for gas on the way home because the warning light had flared up and Will didn't like the idea of waking up stranded out in Wolf Trap waiting for a jerry can delivery. The lights of the gas station lit up the black trees as the sun set and the forests darkened. Will unscrewed the cap and grabbed the pump as Matthew closed the door behind him, jiggling on his feet in the cold air.

"We need anything?" he asked, picking at a patch of rust above the wheel arch; he heard another car pull in, engine purring off.

"Coffee," Will said after a moment's thought, "if you want it. I'm almost out."

"Coffee huh? This mean I'm getting breakfast?"

Will dug in the back pocket of his jeans and pulled out his wallet, tossing it over. Matthew tried to catch his wandering eyes and failed. Will could still see his grin, a flash at the side of his vision. He kept his eyes on the rising numbers as the gasoline pumped through and ignored him, even as Matthew slid his hand across his back as he passed.

"Get the gas while you're in there."

"Yes sir."

It should have been simple. He stopped just before thirty three dollars, squeezing a little more in to try and make the numbers round. Will smiled softly to himself. *One day you're gonna drive yourself crazy trying to make everything nice and even*. His father's words fitted with the smell of gasoline on the crisp air. It bit at his face. Will looked up, out from under the canopy of the gas station, and found the night clear; the stars pushed through like light from a torch behind a ragged blanket.

The pump slid back into its sheath, and the cap screwed back into the car. Everything had its place. Will realised, as he looked up and saw Matthew leave the store, stopping as someone brushed past him, that perhaps he was still looking for his.

It wasn't something that he expected, but it did not surprise him. Not in the way he expected it should have. One moment Matthew was saying something to the passer by, a man taller and stockier than himself, and the next there were coffee grains spilling across the chilled tarmac as Matthew took a shove to the shoulder, dropping the jar.

A fist replied, crushing into the taller man's abdomen. Will heard a car door open and a woman's voice calling out.

"Hey, what're you doing!?"

For a strange moment Will thought the words were for him, as he simply stood and watched. Watched as Matthew took the winded man by the hair and slammed his face into the thick glass window, sending a thin crack splintering through it with the sound of shattering bone. Watched as a

heavy punch to the face snapped the man's head back against the ruined glass. Watched as the man crumpled to the ground, curled inwards to deflect the savage kick to his sternum, then stomach, then face. The woman's tearing voice was mixing with Matthew's, panted and low as he punctuated his words with every violent action.

He just stood and watched, *you just stood there and watched me*, and wondered absently. Is this how he felt? Was this how Hannibal had felt then. A rapid pulse and a discerning eye, movements slowing down as he pulled in every last detail, of blood on the ground, slick and dark, to the woman, hysterical, rushing into the shop. With the same apathy as to whether or not it stopped, or that the man on the ground was clearly alive when Matthew spat on his prone form before walking towards the car, his face a picture of tightly contained fury.

"Fucking piece of shit," Matthew hissed out, yanking the door open and slamming it behind him; Will joined him, pulling out without another word.

You just stood and watched. You just stood and watched me. You didn't even try and stop me.

Did you wish for me to stop you?

Matthew sat, fingers of his right hand to his mouth, elbow against the door, eyes on the dark road outside. Will could see the blood scraped flesh on his hand, his nails bitten. He wondered if it was because he didn't ask for an explanation that Matthew spoke at all.

"Aren't even gonna ask?"

"What kind of answer will I get?"

"The fuck is that supposed to mean?" Matthew looked to him sharply.

Keeping quiet didn't seem wise but Will didn't have the energy to answer. His mind was alight with half garbled memories; an arm around his shoulders, the sound of boiling water. *Would you bury my bodies in the ice Hannibal?* He was almost startled when he realised he was driving carefully up the path to his house, having been lost in thought. Matthew hadn't offered anything further.

Once inside Will grabbed his med-kit from the bathroom and filled a bowl with warm water, while Matthew hung up his jacket and absently ruffled the heads of the few dogs curious enough to approach the stranger in the room.

"Sit down," he ordered Matthew; Will couldn't help but smile when the dogs also took the command, watching him expectantly.

Cleaning the wounds only made the memory worse; vivid like black ink spilled on fresh, white paper. He mopped the crusting blood from reddened knuckles, cleaning carefully. Matthew hissed only once, as Will dabbed the wounds with iodine. The following silence had Will's eyes search upwards, finding Matthew watching him carefully.

"He called me a fag," he said, as if testing how far the explanation would get him, what with Will's obviously unnerving silence, "not very inventive, huh?"

"This how you ended up serving time before?" Will asked as he began delicately unwinding the bandage, as he remembered Hannibal doing.

“Kinda,” Matthew rubbed at the back of his neck and looked away, towards the blank television screen, “Look, sorry about the coffee.”

“Why did you hit him?”

“What?”

“It’s a straightforward question.”

“I told you. I already told you.”

“That’s it?”

“And the motherfucker pushed me,” Matthew said wryly.

“A coiled spring, huh?”

“Yeah, well, now you get to call me a damn hypocrite if you want.”

“I was thinking more somewhere through the looking glass.”

“You know I just love it when you talk in riddles. It’s so fuckin’ helpful.”

“I’m making you dinner, aren’t I?”

“Yeah,” Matthew watched him closely, a slight smile at the edges of his lips, “I guess you are.”

It turned into an odd evening. Matthew walked about as Will made dinner, shouting questions from other rooms as he explored, or trying his best to fend off the attentions of a multitude of curious dogs. Winston seemed the only one not interested, staying in his basket. They ate on the couch, something mindless on the television. Matthew washed up. Will let him because he insisted. Afterwards they talked and Will found the presence of mind to laugh quietly.

When Matthew left to use the bathroom Will stood up and rifled for the letter he’d stashed in his desk drawer, hurriedly buried beneath a pile of road maps and loose filofax notes. Will pulled the cards from inside and stared at them. He grabbed a pen and ticked them both, *‘attending’*. He would post them tomorrow.

On Matthew’s return he found Will standing by the couch, lost in thought. On touching his shoulder he was greeted with cold grey eyes and a slightly guarded stare. Then he was taken by the hand and led to the bedroom; the door shut solidly behind them, as if to keep the monsters in.

There was never any problem parking with the bike. Nice and slim, easy to manoeuvre. It slipped up against the sidewalk, in between a silver Mercedes and a more familiar Bentley; blue, stylish, ostentatious. He’d seen it out front a few times, as he’d parked the van at work. Matthew hung his helmet on the handlebars as he flipped out the kickstand.

Would he be mad? He wondered. Will rarely was, but Matthew wondered how far pushing would get him. Breakfast had been nice, after all. Waking up to toast and cheese and the last, scraped together cup of coffee. Different than usual. A surprising lack of barriers. Will normally kept the

obvious ones functioning, to the point that Matthew wondered if he'd even recognise those more subtle. Still, regardless of progress, being here was probably best kept to himself.

He sat in the waiting room, wondering if the obscure art on the walls was meant to intimidate, in the same way the choice of neutral grey for the paint was supposed to calm. What a lot of fucking psychologist's bullshit even before you walk in the damn door, he thought. Another veil perhaps? Matthew had heard enough through closed doors, or around corners, to pick up on the gilded net Lecter sported. Swinging it across the pond to try and catch the bigger fishes. Benign and aloof, indeed, he thought facetiously, lips twisted. Chilton was a blind fool not to know when he was being used, but then the Boss had never been the brightest. Hovering above, Matthew felt he always had the better view.

It was barely possible to pick up the muffled conversation happening beyond the heavy door. He wondered if the good doctor had a patient in his den. Would it be someone he knew? Not that he cared. Most of the people he knew were neurotic in some way or another.

No one emerged. Matthew surmised the telephone. He sat back in the chair, comfortably, and drummed his fingers. Eventually, the door opened smoothly.

"Matthew Brown?" he was asked, the accent lengthening the 'o' and making a bite out of the 'a'.

Matthew looked up as if only just noticing the doctor's presence. His eyes felt offended by the off blue suit, run through with a red check. Older than he was, a lot older he'd wager. Yet so cleanly cut it was difficult to tell. Clear, unusually coloured eyes regarded him neutrally as he stood, leather's creaking, and smiled. Lecter stood back and offered the open doorway.

"Please, come in."

Chapter End Notes

Also the three little words Will wanted to say to Dr. Barber were 'go fuck yourself'. In case anyone was wondering ;)

Oh and if anyone has read the 'Administration' series by Manna Francis, they will realise I have clearly lifted the scene with the panther. Also if you haven't read that series and happen to like mild science fiction, engaging stories and good characters along with a healthy helping of kinky smut, I very much recommend it (I have all her books. What a nerd). Absolutely wonderful indeed:

http://www.mannazone.org/zone/admin/index.html

Leur Font du Mal ou Leur Causent du Tort (la deuxième partie)

Chapter Notes

"Leur Font du Mal ou Leur Causent du Tort (la deuxième partie)" - 'Do them Wrong (part 2)'

Apologies for not quite making it to the Party yet. Next chapter, I promise, Bedelia!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The smell. It reminded her of the lodge, not far from her house. Marissa used to invite her over sometimes, when she was able to get her dad to let her visit, and once there had been spiced seed bread and fresh pesto. So exotic and almost clandestine. Leftovers Marissa had swiped from the kitchens. A wedding, complete with bride in flowing gown, bridesmaids all in a gaggle, had happened earlier at the church in town. Everyone had gathered for the reception in the Lodge's main hall, high beamed and filled with chatter. She remembered they'd peeked through the doors, smiling and laughing but not sure why.

The smell of pine nuts cooking, the roasted smell of seeds. *It was so difficult to think about Marissa now because Hannibal...*The box in her hands was still warm. The bread was thick and the butter soft. A container of hot, pumpkin soup. A small, unknown desert that smelled heavily of raspberries. She picked out the bread because it was filled with memories and resentment. It tore in her hands. For a moment she imagined scrunching it between her palms, lumps of dough between bitter fingers, throwing it at the wall to hear the satisfying thump, throwing the soup against the wall and watching it splatter, and then tearing up the clothes he'd given her and the..!

Sometimes she wondered why she stayed so placidly. There was enough money left in her purse to run. She would maybe even be able to get to her cousins if she could break out. Jimmy the latch on the door maybe. Just think about it, *think about it, it would only take..!* But she knew it wasn't a latch on the main door. Deadbolts. She had heard them when he left every time.

She thought of home. Two weeks after her fifteenth birthday, her dad had put deadbolts on her room door. He had heard that teenage girls liked to sneak out at night to meet boys. Not that Abigail ever had, it was just something he'd heard. She could remember watching him, carefully and quietly screwing the bolts into the thick wooden frame. When she asked what was going on he'd turned, put both his large hands across her ears and pulled her forwards, laying a kiss upon her forehead. Then he'd looked at her with a sadness in his eyes that she wouldn't understand for a long time, stroking her long hair with his hand.

She wondered how long ago Hannibal had left it, the food, sitting in the heater bag by the door. She hadn't woken when he did so. Must have been quiet. He was always so quiet these days. She wondered why he even did it. For a time, when he'd first brought her here, she imagined he would just leave her to rot. Trapped in the nightmare room: elegant chairs, a comfortable bed, bathroom; high walls and ceiling of corrugated iron. It had been dark when she was brought here. Wherever here was.

Instead he was careful and caring and, she didn't know if he was aware, his eyes had that same sadness; her father's sadness. The look of a person afraid, so afraid, that they were going to lose someone precious. An inevitable sadness. One or two times she'd thought of mentioning it to him but the words had stuck in her throat. If she asked one question she would have to ask them all. She knew she wouldn't be able to stop them pouring out.

Was Alana alright? How long are you going to keep me here? Are the FBI still looking for me? And those were some of the easy ones.

When can I come home? Was one of the worst, because she knew that deep down she could never run, never leave, because he would never let her go. She would go home to him because it was what she had always done.

What did you do to Will? And that was the hardest, the one which blew all others to the wall. The one she wanted to scream every time he came near her. Because she had heard Will shouting that night, the night Hannibal confessed. She had heard him in her room upstairs as she hid in the pantry. Had heard something hit the ground. Then watched through the crack in the door as feet descended the stairs. A side glimpse of someone carrying someone else in their arms, *of Hannibal carrying Will in his arms*, and she had felt like screaming and rushing out and beating her fists against him and demanding an answer because he loved him, he *loved* him, she knew he did and...

...and dad had loved her too, he had loved her mother and had cherished her and always protected her and then she had to watch, unwittingly *watch*, as he put down the phone and picked up the carving knife from beside the chicken mom had roasted, walk up behind her, eyes hard, grab her by the hair and run the knife across her throat, and then turn, face filled with the sadness that was all his own, and come for her...

The stainless steel knife that Hannibal had left with the bread and butter never made its way to the door, never tried, even futilely, to escape. Never hid itself beneath her pillow, hoping to find and arm or a leg or anything soft and easy to stab at next time Hannibal appeared.

Abigail sat in the armchair by the space heater, chewing her fingernails and staring at the other chair across from her as the questions ran circles in her mind. They were always the most difficult to dispel, the most difficult to rid herself of once they were entrenched.

When can I come home?

What did you do to Will?

Knocking. Someone was knocking. Blinking his eyes open, Will squinted against the glare peeking in through half drawn curtains. He tipped his eyes down to find the alarm clock. Eight fifty stared back. *Shit*, he thought wearily.

"Mmm," came a half irritated, half asleep groan from next to him.

"Go back to sleep," Will muttered, clearing his throat as the words stuck and the cold air hit his chest; a sleepy hand made its way out from under the covers and ran blindly down his side. Will let out an involuntary shiver and flinched, before grabbing the wayward limb and pushing it away. He

got up and dressed quickly in the first things that came to hand, knowing that a pair of brown eyes had emerged, watching him as he did so.

A soft, button down t-shirt covered the bruises he couldn't see; those he knew were at his shoulders. A pair of jeans up over those he could see; red and blue at his hips, like rusted dents in old steel.

It had been a mistake, he knew it had as soon as he'd done it. Showing Matthew the way to his house only allowed for the man to be impulsive; and Will knew he was impulsive. Had known it even before there were cracks in the shop-front glass and blood on Matthew's hands. So letting him take that step further had been a mistake. Only one he hadn't expected would be as destructive as it was.

The night before had been...tasteless wasn't the word he wanted. Distorted was perhaps closer to the truth. Unexpected? He would call it that. As he walked through the living room the sight assaulted his sense of order; misaligned, everything out of place. Papers and photographs still littered the coffee table, crime scenes and red ended limbs, a half drunk glass of whiskey on the floor by the couch where he had been lying, Matthew's jacket dropped on the floor by the back of the dining chair where he'd tried to hang it and missed.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Will snapped, standing on his porch.

He wouldn't have been so damn touchy if it weren't for the sawn limbs and thick, red virtuousness and blame and hurt and hurt and hurt *which had been numbing his mind as he stared at the photographs and poured whiskey down his throat like water and let his imagination run free behind closed eyes. He wouldn't have stood like a guardian in the doorway if it hadn't been for the need to keep everything hidden, to keep everything locked away from prying eyes. He wouldn't have been so close to the edge if he hadn't been thinking, moments before, of the report of Lehrwood, nine years old, brought in by a concerned neighbour when he was found naked and bruised sitting in their driveway. Wouldn't have been so lost if he hadn't been considering whether it was more likely that Lehrwood had sexually assaulted the dead man in the wine press after he dismembered him rather than before; and what it meant if he had.*

A mind full of sickness was a bad place to start from. No way to see the wildness in Matthew's eyes when Will was trying to ignore it eating him from the inside out.

*The fact that he hadn't received much in the way of an answer further than hands at his face, holding him still as Matthew rushed in and kissed him, made things worse. Sloppy, fervent and somewhat of a fight as Will tried to back away. A harsh shove at a solid chest and Matthew stopped, stepping back a few paces, moving about on his feet as he stared at Will, arms loose at his sides. It had been difficult not to see the...*man in the doorway, gentle and calm but for the fact Will could see he was resting on the balls of his feet, ready to*...leap before it came. Will found himself in a mangle of limbs, pushed against the back of the sofa, hot breath against his neck.*

Something in him wanted to bite back, while the other wanted to be alone, alone *while the demons crawled up out of their cage and slipped out through his mouth.*

"Didn't answer my damn question," he finally ground out, hearing a growling bark from the living room doorway.

"Do I need a reason to see you?" Matthew asked; no calm in his flushed face, but also too sincere as he leaned back and stared at him.

“Yeah, you do,” Will replied succinctly, “I’m busy. Go home.”

“Don’t fuckin’ order me around,” there was no malice to the words, but the arms around him tightened.

“You don’t want to be here right now,” Will had said slowly, dangerously, “go home.”

“Those god damn eyes,” Matthew had smiled as if to himself, his stare high and glassy, “they’ll be the fuckin’ death of me.”

It hadn’t been a fight. Close to it, as close as Will thought he might have ever come without throwing punches. The thick, red virtue had turned to thick, red heat, and the lust in the way Matthew bit down at the junction of his shoulder and neck threw his world atilt against his wishes. Will had been barely aware of the thoughts flashing through his mind as Matthew struggled out of his jacket and tried to dump it on the chair. Had been barely aware of anything much except touches on his skin and feeling sick at the thought that he wasn’t fully himself.

That he couldn’t keep poor, frightened Graeme Lehrwood out of his head as Matthew jerked down his jeans and gripped his hips so hard that Will winced at the pain, *didn’t want this, please don’t*, as they grappled on the bed until Matthew had both his wrists in one hand and was pushing in slowly, muttering muffled cusses at his ear, *I’ll kill you, fucking kill you if you touch me again*, as the pace increased and the momentary tenderness spiralled from sight while Matthew brought Will’s captured hands up, held by the wrists, sliding the palms up across his torso as he fucked him, up to his collarbone,

“Don’t you want your hands on me baby?” he had ground out as he clasped Will’s shaking hands around his throat, “Don’t you want to?”

The fact that it had been a stupid fucking question was what had made it difficult to fall asleep, made him lie awake, staring at the ceiling, with Matthew’s arm across his chest and his sleepy breathing by his ear. *The feeling of tender skin tensing beneath his fingers; rough, hot friction as he squeezed tighter, tighter, felt muscle and bone beneath, felt the squirming of a throat gasping for air against his palms, a struggle, the sound of choking and then...*

It was almost nothing more than a fuzzy memory, outlined in black and white. He didn’t know whose hands they were, those that reached out in front of him, his own or Lehrwood’s or someone else’s entirely. Somehow it didn’t seem real. As he answered the door, the thought scared him.

“Good morning, Will.”

Will was sure he might have stood there longer than he thought he did, blinking at Hannibal Lecter; mainly because, after a few moments, a small, familiar smile creased full lips. Will felt as if he must have seen more, too much, was ill at the thought of it. *Not me,* the thoughts came fast and confused, *but if not me then who? How many? Why am I..?* He only realised Hannibal was talking as he forced the calm upon himself, reigning everything back in tightly.

“If you would prefer...”

“Come in,” Will interrupted on instinct; *bad idea,* he thought too late. He opened his mouth to try and correct it, “or has something come up? Do we need to go somewhere?”

“Something you need to see, down at Westhill, but I had thought breakfast might be in order first,” he paused as Will stepped away from the door, “thank you.”

Will cleared his throat and grabbed a thick cardigan he kept hanging by the door, slipping it on. The air was bitterly cold, nipping. The silence between them only made the sounds of the shower down the hall louder. Hannibal hesitated briefly by the couch but didn’t say anything further.

“I was just making coffee,” Will lied, heading towards the kitchen, “do we have time for one?”

“It would be a wonderful complement,” Lecter’s voice held the hint of amusement Will did not appreciate.

The kettle boiled and then the coffee percolated. Will took this time to feed the dogs. No point in asking yourself why he’s here, he thought, just deal with the fact that he is. Maybe Jack has..? He stopped himself before he could get carried away. It would only lead darker places than he needed it to. Hannibal was inside now, back inside. Why did you let him in? Frightened? Can’t always run as soon as things become close and real and more than you can handle.

Can’t I? He bit back.

No need to make things difficult. He’d already done that to the best of his abilities before. *Run, run, run, and then where do you find yourself? New territory, lost, starting all over again from scratch.* Better to let the fly dangle a little longer in the water. They would leave for whatever nightmare Jack had in store, and Will could keep to the shadows lingering in his head because now they were useful, necessary, not just a jumble of someone else’s traumas trying desperately to infect his own.

When he poured the coffee he realised he was shaking. The shower had stopped. He stared at the dark liquid and the reflection which greeted him was a face deformed, warped. Looking away did little to dispel it.

“Is that coffee?”

Everything was piling up, slowly but surely; a slow motion car wreck. Will didn’t turn as he poured a third mug and pushed it along the counter towards Matthew. The man ignored it, walked up behind him and took a hold of his hips, warm lips tracing the curve of his neck. The smell of freshly washed skin and his own shampoo was out of place on another.

Hands twisting soft skin and a feeling of splitting away, of staring in at himself and wondering who he was looking at. Will blinked and spoke without tone.

“I have to go in a couple of minutes. Work. Drink your coffee.”

A terse few seconds in which Will stood, mugs in hand, and waited for Matthew to retreat. Eventually it came, two paces back, enough to skirt around.

“Good mornin’ to you too,” Will heard Matthew mutter as he walked back into the corridor.

Returning to the place he had left him revealed no Lecter. A momentary spike of worry that he and Matthew would run into each other, *passive fireworks he wasn’t in the mood for,* before he hurried back. Walking to the living room found him sat at his small dining table, shoved unceremoniously out of the way into a corner for most of its life. Two plates sat before him, onto which some sort of sandwich was being placed. For a moment he hesitated, felt displaced...*a memory of chicken and*

*pasta and wine, and warm hands and flushed cheeks and...*before forcing his feet forwards. Lecter nodded his thanks for the steaming mug of pitch.

“Well remembered,” Lecter said after his first sip.

“Not exactly difficult to remember to put nothing but coffee in the cup. What am I about to put in my mouth?”

“An American twist on a French classic.”

“It’s a croissant.”

“The filling should make it acceptable enough.”

“It’s...” one mouthful, *bacon, cream cheese, sour cream,* chewed, swallowed, *god that’s...*“delicious. Thank you.”

“Not at all.”

“Going to tell me what’s at Westhill?”

“Something familiar,” Lecter said between bites, “Jack is concerned that the Chesapeake Ripper has claimed another victim.”

“Then why the hell didn’t he call me?” Will frowned, his heartbeat quickening involuntarily.

“I believed this was the best course of action. Calm sails catch more wind. You must not become overly animated.”

“So what are...is this some sort of welfare system now? For god’s sakes Hannibal I’m not a china tea cup.”

“Civility seems to have passed us by,” Hannibal said as he sat back, wiping his hands on a thick napkin produced from his pocket, “it seems we have moved directly to friendly. Who would have known the two were so distinct.”

“Just drink your coffee.”

Finished in silence. *Comfortable silence, shouldn’t be, though it is*. He left the table in disarray, all plates and mugs, and grabbed his coat. The smile, on catching Hannibal looking at the breakfast mess with a longing to rearrange, tidy, clean, was involuntary. *A nice, easy morning with memories of...Don’t you dare forget, don’t you dare* forget *what he did to...*

Will walked purposefully from the room.

“Front door key,” he said, holding the keys up as he watched Matthew fish around for hastily discarded clothes in the bedroom, “back door key. If you let the dogs out then leave the back door open.”

“Seen my shirt?”

“Uh...” Will scanned the room quickly, finding it behind the dresser; picked up and tossed quickly, Matthew caught it in the air. Will shook the keys before putting them on the side table, “they’re

spares, so just leave them under the mat."

"And here I was thinking you were giving me a set," said with sarcasm, layered with truth.

"No."

"No?"

"*No*."

Matthew was slowly nodding when Will found the wherewithal to look at him, his face set; a look of resignation, tinged with doubt. He hauled the shirt over his head, pulling it down over tattoos and skin. *Fevered eyes and unexpected pain. Will hated that something inside of him leapt at the hanging treat of it, sinking its teeth in.*

"Look, if last night was too much..."

"I don't have the time for this," Will muttered, sighing; he continued without thought for the lie in his words, "it's just...difficult when people show up unannounced."

"Oh but *he* gets to?"

"It's work, Matthew. We work together."

"You want me to call next time?"

"I'd rather you..." Will stopped, unsure where he had been going with it.

"What? *Didn't?*"

"Enjoy putting words in my mouth?"

"Not as much as you enjoyed breakfast."

"Still a magpie on the wire."

"Jesus, Will. Can't you just speak straight for one minute?"

"There's irony in there somewhere," Will frowned, scratching at his nose, eyes averted; he picked up the keys again before tossing them to Matthew, "front door, back door. I have to go to work."

The snow had frozen overnight. It crunched underfoot. Will thought he heard an echo, knowing somewhere in his mind that it was simply Hannibal's following tread.

"Shall we take my car?" Lecter suggested.

No. I don't think so. That's a bad...

"Alright," Will nodded; he pulled open the heavy door and sat down without questioning himself.

Questions would only demand answers. He was currently hiding from those as best he could.

The car purred into life, the heater turning on with a puff of hot air. Will shifted uncomfortably as he put on his seatbelt, unzipping the neck of his jacket and cardigan to stave off a sweat. When the

car did not move Will looked to his left.

No words necessary. Will was beginning to think it was a habit between them. One he didn't want. He didn't need habits, or understandings, or mutuality. It was all he could do to swallow as Hannibal reached up with a gloved hand, peeling back the flopped down collar of his cardigan to show the skin beneath.

Maroon eyes watched. No reaction visible, but for a slight flutter of eyelashes. Will looked back to the windshield, lifting his hand to zip up his clothes to the chin. *Heat and heat and heat*. Hannibal retracted his hand when forced. The car's large wheels bounced comfortably over the uneven ground, out towards the highway.

"He is one who likes to leave his mark," Hannibal said once they were on even ground.

Fingers at his hips, bruisingly tight.

"He's not the only one," Will rejoined, wishing he had the strength of will to ignore the obvious opening.

Teeth at his neck, flesh pulled inside a willing mouth.

"That is unworthy of you. No mark of my own was necessary."

Remembrance of soft fingers against his face, stroking away the last of his thoughts as he fell, hitting something soft...

"Not all marks are visible."

How many?

Many more than...

"Christ," Will muttered, shaking.

"Will, are you alright?"

"Pull over."

"I am sorry..?"

"*Pull over.*"

As the car slowed Will felt as if he were coming down from something...*a high, a fall...*unbuckling his seatbelt as Hannibal pulled smoothly onto the hard shoulder, hazard lights flicked on. Part of him did not wish to look, part of him was desperate to.

"Look at me," he said.

"You are flushed," Hannibal said by way of reply, turning in his seat to face Will; one un-gloved hand reached up to feel his forehead but was batted away, "are you unwell?"

"Did I see you?" Will forced the words through a tight throat. The question had seemed to slip from nowhere, suddenly becoming a reality in his mind, "the night I...was taken. Did I see you?"

“I do not know,” Hannibal said, face open and honest, “did you see me?”

“I wouldn’t have trusted my own eyes, not back then,” Will said, shaking his head forcefully, “I just wondered if...”

“What is it that you want to know, Will?”

A rush of fear, followed swiftly by overwhelming want, a desire to feel that way he could remember he had, *he had he was sure he had*, almost as if Hannibal could run his palm down his back and make his world fall apart. He felt as if he were someone in another’s skin, loose fitting and ragged.

I need you to be my anchor .

I am.

It took only a few unsteady movements to turn, pull himself up against the handbrake and grab.

The mouth beneath his was willing. Hannibal did not resist. The kiss was sweet and ruthless with an underlying violence that made his heart pound. Hands reached up to hold his elbows gently. Will screwed his eyes shut and pushed back. He fell against the seat, turning his face towards the window.

“Just...drive. Please.”

Another demand met without comment or argument. Will almost wished Hannibal would resist him more than he did. It would make his life infinitely easier.

Thick, red lines. They wavered in his vision like barriers. He was trying to see the Ripper, trying to see his design, but the lines they were out of joint. Will did not look to the body as the thought entered his mind.

He held him down tightly, because the bruises at his wrists were from fingers, not restraints. He blinked. *Soft lips, pressing his open. Eyes closed.* Whose memory was it? Will was beginning to wonder. It was the first of many bad signs. Or he hoped it was the first.

Will hunkered down by the car, still sitting in the garage in Westhill where a couple had been attacked and killed in their home, and put his fingers against the blue painted door. Next to the bloody streak smeared across the handle. Breathe, he told himself, just breathe.

Pushed his head against the car because he was struggling so hard. Crack, blood, dizzy, subdued. Almost lost him a few times (seen in the cans knocked from the shelves) *almost overpowered. It was sloppy, needed work. Yet in the end...*

Looking up to the torso sat upon the workbench, arms and legs held in vice grips to the knotted wood, Will felt it drip. *Drip, drip, drip*. Slick blood that no longer flowed. A design half recognised because it was not his own.

“It’s not...” he started strong as he stood up quickly, turning at the sound of feet against concrete; he found Hannibal already standing inside as the doorway opened, “how long?” he asked accusingly.

A gentle hand gripped his arm, held him steady. The familiar scent made Will feel weak. Hannibal slid his tongue into his mouth and kissed him for as long as Will was able to allow it. Eyes back open when he realised they'd slid shut. He cleared his throat. Shivered. Tried to listen.

"Long enough to supervise," Hannibal replied easily as Jack walked in, talking to Beverly.

"Get everything back to the lab ASAP," Jack was saying, "we have to push this through before Wilson gets his orders in."

"Got it," Beverly said, giving Will a quick yet reserved nod before she left.

Will couldn't find the wherewithal to reply. It was difficult to take his eyes from Hannibal, observed as he felt he was.

"I don't need you *watching* me while I'm working," Will said venomously, as if reigning each word back in.

"What do we have?" Jack asked, breaking through.

"Someone else," Will snapped, rubbing his hands together, "it's a fake."

"Meaning you think this isn't the Ripper?"

"Clumsy, badly planned, imprecise, lacking imagination and forethought," Will said his list with a lilt of sing-song, "take your pick of everything the Ripper isn't, and it's here."

"That's quite a conclusion."

"Do you really need it spelled out?"

"No," jack said precisely, "what I need is for you to calm the hell down and start from the beginning. And if you talk to me like that one more time, Will, we'll have problems."

"Problems," Will muttered, shoving his shaking hands into his pockets, "add them to the list Jack," a dark look from Crawford was offset by Hannibal's curious eyes in the background. Will blinked rapidly and turned away from the car, "from the beginning then."

Will walked them back through the house, back through the story he'd seen play over the carpets and the linoleum and against walls and doors. His movements were stiff, jerky. He rolled his shoulders when they reached the front hall, stepping around the body of the woman on the floor. At the front door Will looked up and stopped dead; the ghost of the stag stood beyond the threshold, white eyes watching. *Tell us what you see, Will*.

"He came in through the front door," he said quickly, gesturing vaguely to the open doorway, "No trauma on the wood. I think it was opened by Mrs. Fisher and she let him in, so he's either someone she knows or he's someone who looks trustworthy, or maybe official. Then once she has her back turned to walk down the hallway he takes out a blunt instrument and hits her here," Will points to the matted blond hair and blood on the female corpse by the bottom of the stairs, "nothing in the hall that could have been used, nothing out of place, he had to bring it himself.

"And then carries on into the house. Blood trail leads straight to the garage. He knew Mr. Fisher was there. He took it with him, held it in his hand," Will let his fingers loosen, imagining, *holding the...hammer perhaps? Holding it tight with the smell of blood in his nostrils and the sound of a*

man's voice on the air calling for the woman in the hallway, *already dead,* "until he tries to surprise Mr. Fisher.

"It doesn't work," Will said, pointing to the scattered cans and half knocked over bookshelf, "they wrestle, probably for whatever I have in my hands, and then I trip him or push him and I brain him against the car door," Will pointed to the first dent, "then take him by the hair and do it again," the second dent and scrape of blood; *the splintering of glass, the sight of pale fingers in dark hair as Matthew pulled the man's head back and then...*"then I grab his hands and get to work."

Tight fingers around his wrists, holding him still as he felt it, felt it all too close and white hot. Will closed his eyes and rubbed at his left elbow. Hannibal walked up to stand behind him and to his left. *Don't you want to?* Fuck, he thought as he felt eyes on his neck. Thought he could feel Hannibal's strong hand at his back but knew it was not there. Fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

I'm not allowed to let you. It's against, it'll *rip*. I hate that I can't forget you, what you did.

Silence. Will shook his head quickly, as if to toss away the clinging webs. *Slipping*, the lips whispered, *you're doing it again*. He knew. Slipping from 'he' to 'I', always slipping from one mind to his own. *Don't be surprised*. He'd told Jack. He felt like telling him again, only knew there would be too much anger in the words, too much venom in the voice. He kept quiet and waited.

"No ties?" Jack asked practically, "For his wrists."

"Where's Jimmy?"

"Price? He's dusting the doors."

"Get him in here."

Once Will had Price with him, they reconnoitred to the corpse and stood for ten minutes, discussing the bruises on Mr. Fisher's wrists. Will could feel Hannibal's eyes on him. *No lapse, always there, always there*. He felt his eye twitch and rubbed it away, careful of his gloves.

"I won't ask how you knew without looking," Jimmy nodded eventually, "but yes, no ties. And if you want my honest opinion," he said, standing up to look at Jack, "no gloves either."

"You're saying he didn't wear *gloves?*" Jack looked dubious.

"Not for this part," Will frowned, "and if he's following the..."

The Angel of Mercy, or the Chesapeake Ripper? Or neither? Who the fuck *was* this man? Will stood up, walking around the torso and its limbless stumps. Looking down at the crease between the man's buttocks it was difficult to miss the blood. A bitter taste in his mouth. Will shook his head and looked away.

"He wanted to..." he swallowed and cleared his throat, "I think he wanted to feel his skin."

"Then he's as stupid as you made him sound," Jack said, "we'll take swabs from wrists and any other extremities. Jimmy, get Brian in here," Jimmy left with a raise of his eyebrows as Jack continued without stopping, "any reason why, Will?"

"Yeah."

“Want to share with the class?”

“I think he might have raped Mr. Fisher,” Will looked about him, feeling a little trapped, “not himself, not *him*, he isn’t that stupid. He’s young, this might be his first. Virgin white and now it’s bloodied. He’s hyped, red on his hands, and his adrenaline is pumping the blood through his veins so fast he can’t think straight. It’s mindless, not part of the motive; it’s a consequence, a side effect. He just wants to...must have used something else, something...god.”

The light turned on, and Will wished that it hadn’t. You sick fuck, he thought suddenly, you used it, didn’t you. Used it even as it had her blood, had her blood on it, you *used* it...

“You think he brought something with him.”

“Could have used the murder weapon. Not sure. There’s no...there’s no detachment here. The Ripper he doesn’t get involved. Clay, moulding clay, and base, slaughter worthy pigs. These two are neither of those. There’s something here. He wants to be him, maybe, I’m not sure. Something else.”

“Well, we won’t get anything more from here just now,” Jack said, brushing up the dust nice and neat, “best get everything back to the lab, where we can start tracking the rest of this bastard’s mistakes.”

When Will felt Hannibal’s hand against his elbow he did not hesitate to follow him outside. They stood beyond the garden, staring out over the road. Will closed his eyes and hauled in the clean air. Harsh with cold against his nostrils, but at least no smell of rust and bone.

“I feel like...like the court jester,” Will opened his eyes, staring at the sun dappled leaves of an acer tree in the garden across the street; peaceful suburbia, stained red, “bring me out for special occasions, but no one can stand it for longer than the second act. Just a big joke for someone, somewhere.”

“I would hope not. Everyone has their place, Will. Your role contains little humour.”

“I don’t know,” he said, taking a deep breath and letting it out as a milky cloud, “sometimes it’s kind of funny.”

“Oh?”

“He wasn’t interested in Mrs. Fisher,” Will said, face painted with hidden amusement as he jerked his thumb towards the house casually, “but he took the easy way in. Front door. Had to deal with her.”

“I must admit I have missed the joke.”

“That garage door,” Will said, turning to point, “can be opened with a liftmaster and an oscilloscope. Or, if you want to be low tech, a wire hanger can reach through and hook the emergency release lever. What I’m trying to say,” Will said, turning back to Hannibal, “is that the Chesapeake Ripper would have been able to do everything that was done without even touching a hair on Mrs. Fisher’s head. She probably wouldn’t even have known her husband was dead until he didn’t come back from work. This guy?” Will shook his head, “Nauseating amateur.”

“Quite amusing,” Hannibal smiled, “you are right.”

“Usually am.”

They stood in the quiet until everyone had frittered away in their cars and vans. Will let Hannibal drive him to Quantico. He decided not to apologise for what his lips had done earlier.

He was sure he would have noticed the smell, if the actions themselves hadn’t been so distracting.

One swift stroke, *down through the muscle*, pulling back was far more difficult, *the saw caught on the bone*.

“We would have had to be strong,” he said to himself as he jerked the saw free of the solid, hard flesh, “and determined. No place for stopping and starting. The cuts were clean enough.”

You need to know, he reminded himself, need to understand. Don’t stop now. He started again on the other leg. Down, *first stroke was the hardest*, up, *but the second would have brought the reality of resistance into play, the reality of what he was doing*, down, *easier on the third,* up, *half way through already, this was simpler perhaps than he had thought it might be.*

He sat back on his haunches and stared at the saw, stuck deep. It sat there like a work of art waiting to be interpreted, the visible blade caught with torn skin and painted red. *Bad idea*, he thought. A slight smile tugged at the edge of his lips.

Will wiped his itchy nose against his bare forearm and looked up. The room was still empty. It felt isolated but exposed, as if at any moment someone would walk through the door and find him. *A sting of exhilaration*. A tongue nipped out to wet dry lips and a breath caught in his tight throat as he tasted stray blood there.

It wasn’t difficult to reach down and pick up the knife from the range of utensils he had picked out for his work. *None necessary beyond the bone saw, but he’d picked them out regardless.* It wasn’t a particularly deadly looking blade. Will felt the weight of it in his hand and remembered dicing onions with a similar knife, while Hannibal stood across from him and watched him through long eyelashes. The handle was solidly plastic, he could feel its smoothness even beyond the thin gloves he wore.

How many pounds per square inch? Will looked down at the prone, exposed flesh before him, laid out like a blank canvas. The wide expanse of no man’s land. A laugh escaped, barely tempered before it became loud enough to carry. His fingers of his right hand curled tightly around the handle and soon the other hand joined them. He breathed in slowly as he raised the knife above his head, kneeling, a rush of endorphins flooding his system, flushing out any doubts or fears or...

The knife sank through skin then muscle with an almost imperceptible, soft sound which was followed by a more weighty, meaty thump. There was barely an inch of the blade still showing, the rest lost beneath pale skin. He stayed there for a moment, a few seconds too long, just holding the handle. *Just breathe*. Then he tried to pull, frowning at the resistance. Another few good hauls and he gave up the knife as lost. Even trying to move it down, to cut its way out, was a hopeless endeavour.

Not quite what you thought? Will wasn’t sure he wanted to answer that. His muscles still felt flushed with nervous energy. He flexed his fingers and rolled his neck, sniffing loudly. *Still there*.

He sat back and shook out his arms, blinking. *No use*. Another. Another then? *Don't*. What's the harm?

The second knife was smaller, stubby in comparison to the other. *Still sharp*. Would it feel the same? Would it feel like..?

Like warm butter, it slides in sweetly.

Will fidgeted, turning the handle in his grip, watching the knife spin slowly, catching the light. He looked back to the flank, the pale skin.

How many pounds per square inch..?

"Enjoying yourself?"

Will's hand stuttered and the knife dropped to the plastic beneath his knees. He slipped as he made to stand and caught himself against the hide of the pig, looking up to find Beverly standing at the edge of the wide plastic tarpaulin. She eyed him over the top of a clipboard as she flicked through the report he'd been writing. Or, he thought to himself, more accurately the notes he'd been taking.

"Enjoying might be a bit of a strong word," he said with a rigid smile that did not reach his eyes, "but someone has to do it."

"I think 'has' might also be a bit of a strong word. We're already running the samples, we've compared the cuts, it's definitely a different saw used, Jimmy thinks he might even be able to get prints from the skin around the wrists...so why are you down here cutting up a pig?"

"I..." *don't really want to answer that*, Will thought, "...I just want to be sure."

"Will, if the Ripper did this I'd concede defeat and sing naked in the cantina," Beverly shrugged, "I agree with you, we all agree with you."

"I just..." Will said, shrugging as he stood with difficulty, using the table to his left as leverage, wiping the blood onto his apron, "I just want to be sure."

"Ok," Beverly said, raising her eyebrows.

"I'm fine."

"I didn't say you weren't"

"Yeah but you were thinking it."

"Maybe. You do realise you look terrible right? Had a decent night's sleep this week?"

"Not really. I tend not to when we're working."

"Mmm. I guess I can't really argue with that," she said, looking back down at the pig, "just don't make a huge mess and piss off the CSI guys, or it'll be me who has to butter them up again. There're only so many pastries my fiancée can make."

It was difficult to watch her put the clipboard down and walk back out into the corridor. *Tell her*, his mind urged. Tell her what? Will fought back as he stared down at the gory mess at his feet, thick

lacerations cut into joints and neck, the knife still imbedded deeply. For a split second he thought he saw Lehrwood there, sawn open, muscle steaming in the cold air, eyes wide, staring ahead at nothing, neck held on by a bare string of tendon. Will rubbed at his face and blinked rapidly. He let out a sigh and grimaced, realising he'd smeared the blood across his cheeks.

"Christ," he muttered; he pulled off his plastic shoe covers and apron, walking to the heavy duty sink in the corner to clean up.

"So I was walking down the stairs yesterday," Brian was saying as they walked towards the front door, "and someone had put little chalk handprints on every second step. All different colours too. I haven't been able to stop thinking about it all damn day. I mean what kind of experiment is that, what the hell could it possibly be for?"

"Maybe it's to see if they can drive someone mad thinking about it," Beverly suggested, looking preoccupied.

"But how would they know if the subject was going insane?" Jimmy chipped in, shrugging and sticking out his bottom lip, "Inadequate data a good study does not make."

"You sound like Star Wars," Beverly muttered.

"You mean Yoda," Brian corrected conceitedly.

"You are such a damn nerd," Beverly said with fake cheer, "enjoy going home to your empty flat every night Zeller?"

"Heck yes," Brian said, adding, "only place I get peace and quiet."

The early evening was layered in dusky grey and the last remnants of magenta scarred cloud. The air had grown bitter, leaving room for a northerly wind to force jacket zips up and gloves pulled on. Will turned and looked over his shoulder as Jack walked out, pulling a thick scarf around his neck. The others continued down the steps, their voices growing quiet. Will wondered if this had ever been normal or if they'd always been nothing but a scramble of individuals all grasping for the same goal.

"After all that's happened and you're *still* driving that beat up piece of crap?" Jack asked as he approached, looking out into the car park.

"She keeps turning over in the morning," Will said, taking the small talk for the opening it was, "what can I say. Anyway, if you would like to lend me the thirty thousand to get a new car feel free."

"Do I get to name the interest rate? If so, yeah I could go for that."

A sudden gust of wind had Will shiver. Jack pulled on his gloves and they walked together. Will wondered if he should feel uncomfortable, but couldn't find it in him.

"Do you think it's strange?" he asked after a few moments.

"What?"

“That in there we’re supposed to be one thing and then out here...” Will glanced at Jimmy and Brian, laughing at something Beverly had said, “out here we’re supposed to be another?”

“I suppose separation is part of any profession.”

“Most professions don’t include dismemberment and necrophilia on their menu. What we do sticks to the skin more than a bad day at the office.”

“Fair point,” Jack gave him a sideways glance; his gaze was heavy, Will felt it, “but you have to keep everything compartmentalised. Only way to keep rolling.”

“I’ve never been that good at tearing down the dot strips,” Will shrugged, “the paper just rips. Anyway, as long as the job is done, it shouldn’t matter, right?”

“Right,” Jack was no longer hiding his scrutiny.

“You think that’s a load of shit, don’t you.”

“I think it’s a lapse in judgement.”

“A lapse in judgement is misconduct. Would you say I’m sabotaging the department?”

“Please don’t put Purnell’s words on me,” Jack gave him a withering look, “all I’m trying to work out is if I’m making a big mistake or not.”

“Putting all your money on one horse? Yeah I’d say you’re taking the risk.”

“And what are your odds?”

“I don’t like to gauge my chances of crossing the finish line. Makes me twitchy. And I wouldn’t want the good Doctor to think I’m going off course.”

“Hannibal is a good friend of mine Will, and until now I’d though he was a friend of yours. You’ve really taking a disliking to him, haven’t you.”

The need to tense up at the thought was outweighed by the need to keep everything locked away. The very last thing Will wanted was for Jack to figure out his problems with Hannibal.

“We had a difference of opinion.”

“And yet today you were laughing together at a murder scene. Maybe I shouldn’t ask.”

“Seems like a good idea.”

“So I shouldn’t be asking if you can keep this all nice and, well, compartmentalised? For the sake of our image. Impossible?”

“Implausible.”

They reached Will’s car first. A terse moment in which Will could tell Jack’s mind was elsewhere and Will’s mind was clamouring to know something not entirely his business. The need to ask the question became strong, mainly because Will knew Jack would never bring it up.

“How’s...” he was unsure what to call her, “how’s Bella?”

“...Still critiquing my waking hours,” Jack replied with a smile that didn’t seem to know where to go, “been waiting long to ask?”

“Thought you might not want it brought up.”

“She’s doing...unpredictably well. Let’s leave it at that.”

“Ok.”

“Actually she was asking after you, a couple of weeks ago. Wanted to know if you were alright.”

“I’d rather you didn’t tell her.”

“I’ll make up something palatable.”

“I appreciate it.”

“Will?”

“Yeah?” he replied as he opened the car door; Jack was watching him closely.

“We’re gonna get this guy,” he said seriously, “after that we can go back to life as we know it.”

“Right,” Will nodded in what he hoped was an encouraging manner, “after.”

“...hear me Graham? Will? He’s gone awfully quiet,” came Chilton’s slightly worried voice from behind Will’s closed eyelids, “perhaps you should alert the medical staff, just in case.”

“All his readouts are fine,” Matthew’s voice, trying for calm but Will could hear the disquiet, “I don’t know what...”

His eyes did not flicker, merely opened in one smooth motion. The real world slipped back into view and Will took a long breath through his nose.

The light on the ceiling flickered. A torch, he thought, it must be a torch; it must be the torch Hannibal had brought. The bulb switched on, off, on, off, reflected in his eyes until they rolled back inside of his head and he felt his neck go loose.

Vague memories of falling unconscious. Only now, now *he saw. Continued to see. Saw as if he were a ring side spectator in his own bone-arena. Staring in at the cut-out theatre of the cabin where he had stayed for that long week, while Hannibal had tested and prodded and calmed his raging mind. The room was peaceful, seemingly normal but for the sight of Hannibal hooking an IV to his arm while he lay in the chair and trembled like a frightened child.*

Seemingly normal but for Hannibal rummaging casually through his bag, pulling out minuscule bottle after bottle, before finding the one he wanted and filling a syringe Will had never seen before. Will watched, stared, as the Will-in-the-chair choked out a cough, made a sound of distress;

watched as Hannibal straightened out Will's prone arm, found the exact puncture wound from the sedative he had previously administered, and injected the clear fluid into his body.

Maroon eyes were curious as they stared down at him, watching as the shivers became convulsions, the convulsions became worrying, the worrying became calmer, calmer, back to the quaking of skin and the twitching of lips. Will wanted to close his eyes as he watched Hannibal lean forwards, place his palms on either side of the face of the Will-in-the-chair and lift his eyelids with the pads of his thumbs. Nothing but whites stared back, stuttering breaths leaving parted, loose lips.

"...listening to me?"

Will looked up slowly, realising his eyes had fallen to the table. He moved his hands and was surprised to find the restraints already loose. When he finally raised his gaze and fixed it upon Chilton, then man stared at him as if he had peeled back the covers, leaned down and seen the monster under the bed. Will blinked. Chilton looked away and composed himself.

"Are we done?" Will asked, over annunciating.

"I would prefer if you let me..."

"Good. Then we're done."

"Will, you are exhibiting clear signs of PTSD," Chilton continued as Will stood, stiffly, "it is unwise for you to lock up these thoughts, these memories."

"Since when did you become an *actual* psychiatrist?" Will asked disdainfully.

"You are trying to deal with memories of severe psychological disassociation," Chilton said, only marginally bitter; Will wondered if he should listen closer but decided against it, "it is unhealthy not to ask for help."

"Just sign the damned sheet Chilton."

Running from one horror to the other was easier. Running from memories of Mr. Fisher struggling below him, screaming for help as he viciously raped him, to memories of placing heavily drugged bodies into the mulch of the forest floor where the fungus would consume and connect them, keep them together, to memories of Bressinden, alive and aware but paralysed, unable to cry out, only tears flowing from his eyes as Will sliced through soft flesh of his cheek carefully with the scalpel, so that now he was not sure if Hannibal and the cabin even existed or were simply a culmination of every vile piece of his ailing mind that had come before it.

He needed to take samples, blood samples, he tried to reassure himself as he walked quickly down the lengthy corridors of the Asylum, *for the clozapine*. *He had to, Sutcliffe told him I was all clear, he didn't know that...*

His hand missed the handle of the main door, ending up slammed palm first against the wood. Will leaned his forehead against the doorframe and took a long, calming breath, eyes closed. It wasn't possible, the memory. It would have to mean that Hannibal knew. *That Hannibal knew.* Will opened his eyes slowly, finding the dark wood before them shot with light. He heard footsteps echoing. His mind flowed back, to the memory he could not grasp, the plague of his waking and sleeping hours.

The man in the doorway stood tall and calm, but for the fact that he rested on the balls of his feet; blocking the only way out. Will felt his hand go to his pocket and pull something out, something round against his fingertips. (the present interrupted, footsteps echoing louder and louder, reverberating against the walls) *It rattled as he pulled it free.*

The book fell away from his hand, landing with a thump.

Will pushed away from the wood, frowning. *Rattled*. Will reached down into his coat pocket and found the habitual tube of aspirin there. He pulled it free and stared at it, shaking it slightly to hear the pills roll around inside. He stared at it. Simply stared at it.

Not possible.

The door was open and he was hurrying down the stairs before the footsteps could reach him. Or so he thought. The air was chill and crisp, though not much colder than the corridors of the Asylum itself. Matthew's hand, however, was very warm as it wrapped around his arm, stopping him in place.

"Hey," he said quietly, hushed, looking around conspiratorially to see if they were alone, "what happened back there?"

"I'm fine."

"Bullshit."

Pulling away was getting him nowhere. Will turned back, giving Matthew an even stare. The other man watched him warily, although Will knew it was nothing to do with his mental state.

Was it real? He couldn't help asking himself, Was it real or was it just a product of his own building hysteria? Of being back on the case, with one or two or even three different killers vying for his attention? Or, more pragmatically, was it a twisted memory due to Chilton's meddling?

Matthew was watching him closely. Will sighed, leaning back against his walking stick and running his left hand over his face. At least, he thought as he sniffed, the issue between himself and Matthew seemed paltry and almost normal by comparison.

"If there was any time to talk about the things you shouldn't ask me to do during sex," Will said bluntly and with little care for who might be listening, "this would be it."

"Considering you're not picking up your damn phone," Matthew said, not denying it, "are you surprised I seized the opportunity? Fuck Will, why don't you just *see* it?"

"See what?" he frowned.

"It's that look, those eyes," Matthew shook his head, raking his teeth across his bottom lip, "same as in there, same as made Chilton back off, because the man has the spine of a leach. Same as..."

"Don't bother."

"Well it's true. You're so curious about it."

"About what?"

“What it’s like to...” Matthew looked around him like a kid discussing virginity, “to kill someone.”

“Little late for that,” Will tensed up.

“Fuck, what, with a gun?” a step closer, his voice lowered, “You don’t seem to rate that though, huh. Not quite the same as with your hands, right?”

“You’re thinking these things,” Will said to himself, “all the time you look at me. Panther in its cage. What, you think I’ve a blank eyed stare because I’m waiting to be set loose? For god’s sakes. And that doesn’t worry you at all?”

“No,” Matthew said without hesitation, hands stuffed in his pockets, “but it scares *you* though, doesn’t it.”

“*What?*”

“You’re scared. You get scared when other people back away,” Matthew took another two steps forwards, slow and cautious, until they were merely inches apart, “when they stare at you like you might have stared at, what was his name? Hobbs? Garrett Jacob Hobbs. You shot him, right? Did you stare at him like he was a monster before you killed him?”

As the words fell from Matthew’s lips, so did Will feel the muscles in his body tighten, his hand clench around the head of his cane, his teeth grit against each other, a frightening and frightened rage flush open inside of him.

“You don’t fucking know what you’re talking about,” he said coldly.

“Don’t I? I’d say I’m pretty fuckin’ qualified. I’ve seen your eyes change from grey to black, Will. Is that how you stared at Hobbs? Or did you see something there you liked, huh?”

The chilly, windblown steps before the Asylum seemed suddenly exposed and agoraphobically open. He blinked rapidly, trying to ignore Matthew’s words. *Exposed*. As if his madness were no longer contained within that small white room with the one grey stripe around the middle. All his insanity, normally enclosed and shut away from prying eyes, was loose and free. Out here in the open world. Will’s mind flashed on and off, on and off, like the torch that had stolen his consciousness away.

He felt Matthew’s hand on his arm again, soft, comforting. This isn’t like him, he thought. Or is it, and you just never noticed until now? Didn’t want to notice. Wanted everything to be *normal*, so much so that you ignore the violence staring you in the face.

“You gotta stop fighting this,” Matthew said softly, “you don’t accept what’s inside of you and you’re gonna tear yourself in half trying to keep it all locked up.”

Wait, he thought suddenly, *wait*.

“Tear myself in..?” he mumbled, looking up at Matthew with scornful disbelief, “Accept what’s inside? Garret Jacob..? Jesus fucking Christ, you’ve been talking to him.”

“What? I don’t know what you...”

“Shut your mouth. Just don’t say another god damn word. You two, *fuck*. Been watching me all this time, huh? Must think I’m thicker than shit in a bottle.”

“Will you’re not making any sense,” Matthew frowned, quickly following as Will began walking down the rest of the stairway.

“Lecter,” Will bit out, “you’ve been talking to Lecter. *Don’t*,” Will said, holding up his free hand as Matthew made to deny it, “just don’t. I get enough lies from him, I don’t need you chipping in too.”

“Look, it isn’t what you think!”

“Frankly, I don’t even want to think what it is.”

“I’m just trying to do what’s right for-hey *watch out*..!”

This time it was both hands on both of his arms, pulling quickly and forcefully, enough that Will fell back against Matthew, scrabbling to hold onto him and stay upright. The car he had almost stormed out in front of jerked to a halt. Will stared into the driver’s seat. Familiar red curls and a sharp face stared back for all of a few seconds before her foot was back on the gas and the car rushed to the automatic barrier. Will followed her with his eyes as Freddie Lounds drove off like a cat burglar caught with her hand in the jewellery box.

“You ok?” Matthew asked, still holding him tightly.

“No,” Will said, his mind already skipping ahead to what would come, “not really.”

It hadn’t been difficult to drive there, find the long abandoned but familiar parking spot he’d always used, and then walk strictly and stiffly towards the man’s office. It had begun to rain, setting the large church behind his office building into a morose and gloomy light. The crows perched upon the gargoyles cawed, fluttering their wings. The sky above seemed bloated with promise.

Entering, that was the harder part. More so than it should have been considering he wasn’t even sure if why he was here was a viable reason. If *it* was real, the memory, the idea, if it wasn’t a fabrication, if the memory was truly a memory or just *some*...something he didn’t want to examine too closely. For if he had concocted it, if he had, then he was sure Chilton shouldn’t be letting him walk so blithely out of the doors after each session.

“Mr. Graham, well this is a surprise.”

Having been staring at the brass plaque screwed into the grey stone by Lecter’s doorway, Will found himself ambushed. Phyllis Crawford looked very different to the last time he had seen her, *floor length dress, curled hair loose, champagne in her hand and sardonic look on her face*. The change was startling. Her skin looked slightly slack, bags beneath her eyes. She looked tired, slightly ill beneath her makeup. Most noticeable was the delicate and tasteful headscarf she wore, covering the hair she obviously no longer had.

Will stood back to give her room, unsure what to say. She had always looked so resentfully full of life to him, as if she were fed up of wearing the skin of a person who was not slowly fading. Now she stepped out with a slow confidence, shut the door behind her, made to leave...but then hesitated. When she turned back to him she was smiling, the rain making soft pats against the umbrella she’d put up.

“You know, I think this might have been fate,” she said, her voice just as rich as he remembered it; one of the few things which had not altered, “would you care to go for lunch? I know a great little place just two blocks from here, haven’t been in years.”

Will was under no illusion of himself. He knew, to an extent, how he appeared to those who existed outside his own skull. Strange, sinister, awkward, inappropriate. Offers of lunch? Not one of the many things he had to fend off in his day to day rigmarole. Although, he had to admit, Phyllis Crawford was far from the humdrum of normal people he encountered outside of work. There was something in her eyes that spoke of a need for company, that same silent desperation overlain with pride and confidence. Will felt it would be wrong to ignore her request.

“I...” he began trying to think of a reason to say no, as if on instinct. I need to see him, I *need* to see him now. But you’re not sure, you’re so unsure and you’re confused and you just damn well rushed over here like a madman and what? You’re going to run in there and ask him if he lied to you about Sutcliffe? Lied to you about everything? You’re mad Graham, you’re loose in the...

The whites of his eyes were all he could see as Hannibal stared down at him like a slide under a microscope.

“Sure,” he said, hiding the shiver across his shoulders as he shrugged his coat up higher around his neck, “I can always come back later.”

Later.

It was more of a bistro than a lunch venue, Will thought as they walked inside. Mainly empty but for a couple by the window, holding hands across the small table. They took a table towards the back, near the very small bar surrounded by cheap fairy lights and a small speaker that gave out tinny, barely discernible music. Will shrugged out of his jacket and realised he had no idea what he was doing here.

“You look well,” was Phyllis’s opening line.

He was unable to stop himself from laughing, soft and gentle and hidden mainly as he tipped his head down and to the left, hands coming together under the table. When he looked back up she was joining him, smiling widely and letting out a deep laugh which ended in a high, sighed, wistful sound.

“Considering,” Will nodded as he looked back and forth across the table, “and you...you did it then.”

“Mmm,” Phyllis was the first to pick up her menu, raising her eyebrows, “my, my. The prices have certainly risen since I was here last. And in answer to your question Will, I did it for Jack at the expense of my own dignity. Only seemed right to pick one over the other.”

“I didn’t know you, uh, had the option.”

“Chemotherapy? Oh yes. I just didn’t think the pain and the misery would be worth a few more months. Seems that many things fall by the wayside when your own mortality is rushing up to meet you. By the way, if you like Mexican food they do wonderful enchiladas here.”

The waiter took their order and they sat, drinks in hand, talking about anything that came into Phyllis’s head. Will realised early on that she had wanted to talk, and had recognised that he did not

wish to bring up anything himself. There was a hint of sadness as something moved her towards a childhood tale, something of her and her sister finding a grass snake in the garden. A slight tension as she spoke of nieces and nephews; Will thought he might have heard resentment for a child never had. Then wry humour as she spoke of the day Jack had proposed, and the mess he had made of every little thing.

“Oh, you must never tell him I told you this,” she said as she pushed away her empty plate, only dotted with a few wilting lettuce leaves, “he would never forgive me.”

“I don’t know, it sounds like precious blackmail material,” Will said, keeping up the high spirits they had fallen into.

“It certainly is,” she agreed, sitting back in her chair, drink in one loose hand, “but instead I’d rather ask that you look out for him. He needs that more than he needs anything.”

“Look out for him?” Will asked, soft frown with his smile, “Honestly, I think Jack might fire me for attempting it.”

“He always was adamantly independent,” she said, staring over Will’s right shoulder, “stupidly so, sometimes. Most men are, I find. Never like to ask for help, or directions.”

Laughing seemed appropriate, even if it wasn’t truthful. He felt the need to tell her that he and Jack were tenuous friends at best, and that Will probably wasn’t the best person to request watchman duties of. It translated to silence, on his part.

“You’re doing the same thing,” Phyllis said, shifting her eyes left to watch him.

“I...I’m sorry, I don’t follow.”

“I thought that perhaps one half would be happy with the situation and the other not. Though it seems you and Dr. Lecter are just as miserable as each other.”

“That’s...” Will stared, feeling the need to stand up and leave, “a little complicated.”

“I think I remember you saying that to me before.”

“Things haven’t really changed,” Will said wryly.

“And yet I found you standing on his doorstep.”

“Yes,” Will nodded, staying tightly shut, “I suppose you did.”

“That’s alright,” she smiled, “if you don’t want to talk about it. I just thought you might like to know that he missed you, while you were gone. It was really rather sad to watch. I do not think I have seen a human being as intrinsically lonely as Hannibal is.”

Will found himself staring at the tattered beer mat at the edge of the table, glued to its curled and weathered edges as she spoke. Something sparked in his memory, sharp and cutting.

“I’m as alone as you are.”

“If you followed the urges you kept down for so long, cultivated them as the inspirations they are, you would not be alone. Neither of us would.”

“Why did you ask me here?” Will asked, clearing his throat when he realised his tone was terse.

“That’s a good question,” Phyllis said, putting down her glass but keeping a hold of it, “would it be wrong to say that I find you a very easy man to talk to? Easier than my psychiatrist?”

“Oh?”

“We’re both hiding.”

Will stayed quiet, avoiding her eyes. He clasped his hands on the table, fingers interlocking loosely. *She sees you*, *like an oracle.* Will wasn’t sure how far the epithet went. He hoped not too far.

“Do you know the problem with a disguise, Will?” she waited until he responded with a shake of his head, “However hard we try, it is nothing but a self portrait. This makeup,” she lifted her hand and stroked her knuckles over her cheek, “is a mask. This scarf, nothing but an obvious cover-up.”

“And me?”

“You’re just like I am,” she said, “you’ve been though hell and now you want to be free of it.”

“I didn’t know that was an option.”

“Oh, it’s always an option.”

“Rather final words,” Will said, frowning, “if you don’t mind my saying.”

“An opportunity sounds final to you?”

“No. To you it might.”

“I’ve begun to find the idea of death comforting,” she said, shrugging slowly, “the thought that my life could end at any moment frees me to fully appreciate the beauty and art and horror of everything this world has to offer. After you woke up, Will, did you not feel the same?”

“No, although I’m beginning to think I was supposed to.”

“Not quite the same circumstances,” she nodded, “although you too are dying a slow death. You both are. One wounded animal can always scent out another.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” Will said, “but you’re worrying me.”

“I would hate for you to worry for me Will. You seem to have so much to worry about already. Do you know that I owe you a great deal? Sounds odd, doesn’t it. When you were missing Jack was away from home a lot. Yet when he was there it forced him to talk to me. It forced me to talk to him. And when he found you and Miriam, well, his world turned upside down. In a good way. I felt like I saw the spark in him again, the drive that kept him rushing to the top. Still does.”

“I don’t know if I’m the best person for Jack right now,” Will said, unwilling to take the praise.

“I disagree,” she said, “but then I suppose you’ll just have to figure that out for yourself. Along with all those other troublesome things.”

He wasn't truly sure why he was here, further than his previous resolve to see him and Phyllis's words sticking in the back of his mind. Standing on the front step of Lecter's house had been simple, but now he had the key in his hand; the key he still owned because every time he'd tried to throw it out he had hesitated. Each hesitation had cost him his chance, left an opening for a reason to sneak in. *Just in case*. He'd kept it, and now it was in his hand.

Will let himself in and felt time shift. Everything was the same, not a thing out of place, down to the soft, warm air, the smell of wood smoke, the dark, varnished teak of the umbrella stand, the smell of something spicy cooking. The shift did nothing for his instability. Will hung up his jacket and toed off his shoes. He closed his eyes against the outline of hands around tight muscles, red stained fingernails. It was difficult to do when he realised his hands were shaking.

It hadn't occurred to him that he might be interrupting until he walked into the kitchen.

She was the first to catch his eye, standing by the counter wearing a floral pattern dress and a wide smile. Turning to pick up a tall glass of beer from the table with one hand, knife in the other, she saw him. Will stopped, hands in his pockets, and watched her shock. Hannibal stood, back to them both, with a white apron around his middle, stirring something in a pot on the stove. Alana put down her glass.

"Will," she said, as if the word were foreign and strange.

Hannibal looked over his shoulder, stalling on finding Alana's statement to be factual and not ponderous. The wooden spoon in his hand was left in the saucepan as he turned, wiping his hands on the dishtowel at his waist. His eyes held none of Alana's surprise, although Will could tell he was perturbed. He realised he was staring when Alana spoke up.

"Are you ok? What are you doing here?" she asked.

"I need to speak to Hannibal," he said quickly, trying to hide the waver in his tone.

She turned to look at the man in question. Hannibal watched him closely. Eventually he nodded.

"Could you please make sure that doesn't stick?" Hannibal gestured to the pot, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder as he passed, "I'll only be a minute."

"Alright," she said levelly, face set, resolved.

They walked to the living room because it was easiest, and warm. Will knew it would be warm because he had smelled the firewood burning the moment he had entered the house. He walked to the grate and stared past it, watching the pokers of flame flit up and die as they tried to escape. He did not miss the door closing quietly behind him.

Closing, locking, no way out, no way to find, no way to have, no way to stop it. Will resisted the urge to place his hands over his ears, keeping them tightly in his pockets. He felt the room hum and then resolve; the sound of a stag calling in the black. The dreams were living, just behind his eyes, trying to creep out into the waking world.

"You've come just in time for dinner," Hannibal said, moving towards him slowly, "Portuguese pork. Hot enough to warm from the inside, if you are of a mind for it."

“If I’ve a mind for it,” Will mumbled, refusing to look around, “I’m not sure my mind is much left of anything.”

“Do you feel..?”

“I feel as if I might be losing touch again,” he said it all at once because trying to take his time would have only lost him his nerve; when he looked to Lecter the man was watching him carefully, “what would you recommend?”

“That you see a psychiatrist.”

“Funny, I thought I was looking at one now.”

“An impartial psychiatrist would be closer to my mark. But if you feel I can help you then I am your friend Will, I will do what I can.”

“Fucking Christ,” Will huffed out, frowning as he dropped his gaze, “you already have my...have me. You know that, don’t you. No, don’t answer, it was rhetorical. Isn’t that enough for you? What more do you want?”

“I’m not sure I follow your meaning.”

“Liar.”

“You appear to revel in labelling me as such recently.”

“I like saying it. There’s a ring to it somehow.”

“That is very rude of you Will. Uncharacteristically.”

“Maybe I’m beyond being polite. Maybe I don’t have that left in me. Maybe my mind,” he said, feeling his voice tighten and tighten with every word, turning to stare at the fire once more, “is only able to deal with so much.”

“Yes. Although I think perhaps your mind is for something else. Or perhaps someone?”

“No.”

“No?”

“*No*.”

Will couldn’t help but look. He had to look, turn to find him there, right there, crowding his space. A person-smile hiding something black beneath, something Will thought might resonate with the dark things in their cage. He shifted forwards jerkily against Hannibal, comprised of a slow grace which belied the heat in his eyes, moved past him. The chair by the fire was warm and soft, cradling as he sat.

“Can I just sit here? Just for a moment,” he asked; the moment passed and he grimaced out a smile, shook his head, “no, longer than that. Than this. Can I just...stay here for a while?”

“What kind of request should I take that as?”

“I’d be interested to know.”

“Then I *should* ask you to leave,” Hannibal said, tilting his head, “but I will not. May I ask why you felt the need to come here, of all the places you could have chosen?”

“I just wanted to feel safe ,for a time. Everywhere else seems alien right now. Like I don’t fit.”

“Not even home?”

“Home’s problematic,” he said carefully, “it wants me to be normal.”

“And you do not feel normal.”

“I’ve never felt normal,” Will scoffed, looking at Hannibal with desperate humour, “what is there to feel *normal* about? My life? My life is my damned job; at the moment I can’t imagine doing anything else, and that scares me. Going back to just teaching seems,” he waved his hand and shrugged, “unviable. Settling down like an ordinary citizen? Even more unlikely. Leaving the FBI knowing what I do is necessary? Going to Florida and fixing boat motors for the rest of my life?”

Will shook his head and put his face in his hands, rubbing tiredly. He looked up, fingers still over his mouth. When Hannibal came to stand beside him he didn’t resist the need to reach out and run the tips of his fingers lightly over the hand that hung loosely a foot or so from his head.

“I can’t leave,” he said, hating the way the hand responded, turning upwards and reaching over to run its fingers through his hair, barely there.

“No one is asking you to quit.”

“That isn’t what I meant and you know it.”

“I know,” Hannibal said, voice slightly gravelly, “and I am not asking you to leave either.”

“Yeah. Somehow that makes it worse. I shouldn’t even be saying these things. I’m supposed to be angry at you, furious. I thought I might have...”

I thought I might have remembered you watching me like a rat trapped in a cage when I trusted you to watch me like a friend.

“Have you spoken to Matthew?” was what emerged instead, said accusingly.

“He came to see me,” Hannibal said frankly, “as a patient. Although I am sure his intentions were not entirely ingenuous on that front.”

Why, he wanted to ask, *why* did he do it? Instead...

“Did you talk about me?”

“Yes.”

“Do I want to know?”

“I know you do not like people talking about you without your knowledge,” Hannibal said, sitting down in the chair beside Will’s own, “so if it is any consolation he only did so for your benefit.

From what I could gather, he truly appears to care for you."

"I know," Will said, biting at the inside of his cheek, "but one person's caring can be another person's hopelessness. I don't think I have what Matthew wants," saying it made it worse, made the guilt real, "Sometimes caring just isn't enough."

"That is true," Hannibal said, nodding, "everyone is searching for someone who understands them."

"I'm not going to apologise for earlier," Will said, careful of where their conversation was steering them, "in the car."

"To be frank it was surprisingly honest of you," Hannibal said, eyebrows raised, "I was unsure if I should pursue it."

"We can't."

"No?"

"We've pulled too many others in now. All planets and moons circling each other."

"When has that ever bothered you?"

"Since I realised how little they mean to you," Will said steadily, "and it makes me wonder how much I do."

"You are my very dearest friend," Lecter said, watching him as he would watch the light through a stain glass window, "and I care about you very much. It would defeat me to know I am being deprived of a chance to know more."

"So you find me interesting."

"Does that bother you?"

"Surprisingly no," Will said, standing, "although I'm sure it should."

"I remember once," Hannibal said as he followed Will, standing by him before the fire, "that you did not find me that interesting."

"And I was reassured that I would."

"And now?"

"Now..." Will frowned, hearing a knock at the closed door, "now I think I find you unsolved."

"You make me sound dangerous," Hannibal's mouth was quirked into a small, subtle smile as Will turned to meet it, "all claws and conspiracy."

"I don't know what to classify you as."

"Perhaps we are not meant to be classified, dear Will, you and I."

"Please," Will said softly, "don't call me that."

Said softly perhaps because it preceded the kiss, and Will did not want to be seen as a complete hypocrite. The knock came again. Will pulled away first with a soft sound of lips leaving lips, his hand against Hannibal's chest. It lingered there, Will staring down at his weathered fingers against the midnight blue material beneath. He sat down solidly as he heard the door open.

"Sorry, am I interrupting?" to Will, Alana sounded anything but sorry.

"Just some unresolved work issues," Hannibal lied smoothly; Will clasped his hands.

"Well dinner needs your attention, because I have no clue what goes where or when," she said, smiling convincingly, "or with what."

A telling pause. Alana did not move. The hint was terribly obvious but no one wanted to acknowledge it.

"Of course," Hannibal said eventually, inclining his head; he walked past Alana and pulled the door to behind him. Not closed.

Staring into the fire only got him so far. He heard Alana approach, stand, hesitate for a moment, then flop into the chair Hannibal had occupied minutes before. She crossed her ankles and leaned back, arms stretched out across the sides of the chair. The fire spat and cracked.

"How long have you had a key for the front door?"

Careful how you answer that, his conscience warned him. Will felt guilty that he was never able to truly forget Alana was a criminal psychologist, trained in the subtle art of interrogation which made the subject feel as if it were not truly being interrogated. That she could see through him like plate glass, and was just as sharp when cut on the shards. Because when Alana Bloom asked you how long you'd had a key, it was obvious to Will that she was asking how long you had been fucking the man she shared a bed with.

"Quite a while," he decided to be vague, "seemed easier."

"You came here a lot, huh."

"Didn't have many other places to go."

"Still don't?"

"...I'm not sure."

The sound of a blender whirring from the next room cut into the fire speckled silence. Will sat up and heard his back crack with the effort. You're such a selfish being, he thought, you and him both. Greedy children not ready to give up your toys.

"I won't sit in the middle like this," she said, sounding tired and exasperated, "you know I've thought something was wrong for weeks now. Always used to tell myself off for not going with my gut. I have a reliable gut, it tends to lead me in the right direction. But this time, nah. Guess I was blinded, just a little. God," she sighed, sitting up, running her hand through her thick, dark hair, "I can't believe we're sitting here talking about this."

"I'm sorry."

“I don’t even know if that works in this situation,” she said, shaking her head, “it makes sense. Oh it makes sense of so much, just...I don’t even know who to blame. I’m not sure if there even is someone. I feel like blaming myself but that’s too much right now. I just...I’m going home. ”

She left without further explanation. Will didn’t have the heart or the right, he thought, to stop her. She had been gentle with him and, in a perversely guilty way, he was thankful for that. She’d had every right to be cruel. Of course the sound of a raised voice from the next room, something hitting a counter top or perhaps the floor, then stern footsteps and a slammed door, insured Will that Alana hadn’t been entirely truthful. She had known who she wanted to blame.

After a further bout of silence the door opened and closed once more. Will looked up over his shoulder to find Hannibal, apron-less, looking utterly inscrutable. Will wondered if, on the day he had labelled Matthew as a sphinx he had been reading another in Matthew’s eyes. If he had seen more of Hannibal there than he’d realised. As Lecter sat down, casually relaxed, Will could see in him a man who would pose a riddle and, if not receiving the answer he wanted, would devour the victim alive and screaming. No remorse.

“Do you do it on purpose?” he asked, saying the words as soon as they slipped into mind.

“Pray tell?”

“Turn me into a horrible human being.”

“It was my intention only to accept you for who you are.”

“You hurt her. You made me hurt her.”

“I made you do nothing. I had thought this was all to a plan.”

“Fucking narcissist. You like to think you fool me. You like to think you fool us all. It makes you smile.”

“Dear Will,” another enigmatic smile, as if to prove Will’s analysis correct, “I am afraid dinner is ruined. Not something that could be left unattended. Unless you would appreciate burnt parsley béchamel? I wouldn’t recommend it.”

Breathing in deeply Will caught the faint scent of cologne, bitter ashes and cloves, “It fits,” he said, “I suppose this fits with us. Nightshade and cinders.”

“How pessimistic,” Hannibal said, “you are insatiable.”

“You would know, I suppose.”

“I think I would.”

Will felt more than saw the hand extended towards him at first. Felt it as a premonition of what he would have done if he were as confident and self assured as Hannibal appeared to be at all times. He looked to the right with his eyes alone, until the strain became too much. Staring back at the fire he blindly reached for long, elegant fingers. They found each other quickly, knotting together tightly and with purpose.

A purpose he was yet to find, but was determined to do so. Perhaps more than Hannibal was even aware.

The article came as he'd known it would. It was ineluctable, like fog after winter sun on the bay. Will stared at the gaudy laptop, sat in the dark, and sighed.

***GRAHAM AS PAID CONSULTANT OR* PATIENT?** The headline sat above a photograph of Will leaving the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, only Freddie had managed to crop the picture to have 'Criminally Insane' be the only two words visible next to Will's head as he walked down the stairs.

That he had been asking himself the same question recently did not help. He perked up at the sound of a car pulling up outside. Will stood up to check through the crack in the dilapidated blinds, all skewed and twisted. Freddie Lounds stepped from her old Jeep, red hair seeming rusty in the sulphurous light form the street lamps.

Will sat down on the sofa and wondered if this was how Lehrwood felt as he had waited in the dark for the Chesapeake Ripper to find him. Probably not, he thought with a grim smile, considering he had no intentions of sacrificing himself.

The lock made a juddering, clacking noise. The sound of muffled swearing. Then the lock gave way, spilling light into the apartment. Will could just see the door from where he sat, the small living room and kitchenette at the head of an L-shape, facing the edge of the bed. Freddie walked in kicking off her shoes , her arm outstretched and ready drop her handbag onto the duvet.

"Long day?"

He had expected an overreaction, but the intake of breath was followed by something he had not thought would be in issue. The twin prongs of the tazer missed him by half a foot, imbedding themselves into the soft fabric of the couch. Will leapt up, wide eyed.

"Jesus *Christ!*" he called out.

"I have a gun," she warned with startling clarity, dropping the now useless tazer and thrashing a small pistol from her handbag.

"Don't you think that if I came here to kill you I would have been a little less overt about it?" Will asked, cocking his head and refusing to raise his hands.

"Then why are you here?" she asked, gun steady, still aimed.

"I have a proposition."

"Do you always start your propositions with breaking and entering?"

"Only when there's the chance of a little payback."

"Payback? What, the article?" Freddie scoffed, lowering her gun to half mast, "Gees Graham, I've written worse things about you."

"I'm glad you remember."

“So, proposition?” she asked as she sidled to the main light switch, flicking it; Will squinted against the light, “Because if you don’t actually have anything more to say I’d like you to get the hell out.”

“It’s a nice place you’ve got here,” Will muttered, one eyebrow raised as he looked around him, hands in his jacket pockets.

“Ok, *get out*.”

“Hannibal Lecter.”

“...Yes?”

“What do you know about him?”

“Why would *you* of all people be asking that of me? I thought you guys were best buddies.”

“Even friends have secrets.”

“This really doesn’t sound like a proposition Will.”

“How much revenue would you be looking at for exclusive rights to the Ripper once he’s caught?”

Will thought he might have seen the moment his words registered in Freddie Lounds’ eyes. They changed from cynical and caustic to pragmatically excited. The gun was forgotten on a nightstand. She began pulling off her gloves, watching him with a hint of suspicion.

“Chesapeake Ripper’s dead, Graham. Everyone knows that.”

“But you don’t believe it,” Will said confidently, watching Freddie shift her weight on her feet, back and forth, “because you’re too smart to buy the bullshit.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere.”

“You know the Ripper isn’t dead,” Will said, “because you’ve already seen his latest victim, right? Surely you saw the similarities.”

“Why would you even ask?” she asked, skipping over denying it, “I mean even if the Ripper was still at large, why would you ask me about rights?”

“Because if you help me catch him, Freddie, then that’s what I’ll give you.”

“You’ll give me unlimited access to the Chesapeake Ripper,” she said, understandably incredulous, “and to write about him, interview him...interview *you*?”

“It can be arranged.”

“Do you even have the authority to promise that?”

“If I catch him,” Will thought, “yeah. I will.”

“And if we don’t?” she said; Will smiled, knowing he’d had her hooked as soon as she said ‘we’. She frowned, shaking her head, “wait a minute, what on earth does this have to do with Hannibal Lecter? You think he’s involved in this?”

“I don’t know yet,” Will said coldly, “but I want to find out.”

Freddie’s tongue darted out to wet her lips. She looked over to find her laptop already open, sitting on her most recent *Tattlecrime* article about Will. He was silently impressed and disgusted that she didn’t even flinch, merely walked over and closed the tab, opening a new one. She typed quickly, eyes keen. Will stared at her, unable yet to fully voice his fears about Hannibal. *The long fingers clasping his were nothing if not hopeful and seemingly innocent. He knew Hannibal cared for him, in the same way he knew that Matthew did. It didn't mean he did not suspect either of them of being capable of more than they seemed to be.* He focused back onto Freddie. After a minute she looked up at him calculatingly.

“Exclusive,” she said.

“Of course.”

“And anything we do, anything a little more risky, I don’t want to be prosecuted. This all falls under your umbrella, ok?”

“Right.”

“You’re being too agreeable. Making me nervous Graham. Couldn’t you throw in a few female slurs just to make it believable?”

“I would if I used them.”

“Huh, nice guy yeah? I’m not sure I buy that.”

Yet she walked forwards and the hand came up, red head tilted to let curls spill. Will looked at it for a second too long.

“Deal?” she asked, raising her eyebrows.

“...Deal,” he said, taking the hand and shaking it firmly.

Sudden and jarring. *Not wanted and sickening*. Hatred and fear. *Love and sadness*. I can’t have this. *A feeling of falling, hitting something soft.*

Jerking awake, his chin slipping from his cupped hand. Will blinked, sitting back quickly and found himself in his office. He looked around quickly: *paranoia*, *a feeling of being watched*. Nothing there but the faint sound of clicking computer keys beyond the door and phones ringing down the hallway. The faint musty smell from his wet jacket hanging on the hook beside the doorway. His laptop screensaver shifting from one photograph to another, *Lenny, then Sascha, then Buster, then...*

Will sat back and told himself to calm down and wake up. A quick and trite ritual he’d fallen into since his days under Lecter’s keen, watchful eye while the unknown encephalitis had crumbled him into the boiling water and watched him dissolve. *Or was that Hannibal who had?* He shook his head and looked at the clock.

“Three fifteen,” he muttered, “you’re here, in your office, and you’re awake. And you don’t remember a fucking thing.”

He couldn't tell if his words were a show of dismay, or an order. You don't want to remember? he asked himself. Fool, of course you don't. What could possibly be worse than knowing the truth?

Yet still you pursue it, because it sits on the edge of your consciousness like a long sought for word on the tip of your tongue. If you could just recall it you could say it, stop the frustration, the longing. It will stop, won't it?

He wasn't truly sure if that were the case or not. After he had begun throwing himself into the Lehrwood case, headfirst, he had first of all come face to face with someone he did not expect: himself. He looked different, that was what Will thought. He felt different. The rush for one, *the rush infesting his limbs and his fingers as he imagined the saw in his hands, the sanctity of his work, the dead blood leaking steadily out in a black pool*, the rush did not leave now. It stayed and it festered. Will felt anxious after he *looked*, after he *saw*.

Thus the pig had been an excuse of sorts, a way to kill two birds with one stone. He would admit that to himself when he was feeling particularly honest. Yes Lehrwood had a shoulder injury, and yes Will needed to know if Lehrwood could slice through necks and shoulders and thighs on his own; he needed to know that Lehrwood hadn't had an accomplice or, worst of all, Lehrwood wasn't the man they were looking for and was, in fact, another victim.

Only there was another reason. *You know there's another reason*, the lips spoke up. Will licked at his own lips in response and began moving about the office, pulling out files from the filing cabinet and placing evidence boxes upon his desk. You wanted to feel it, *feel it*, with your own hands. 'Such a vivid imagination Graham, you should work for Hollywood', his professor had once told him as he had hypothesised what it would take for a mother to kill her own children, 'we're talking about Medea here, not Susan Eubanks'. Will had felt like telling him there was no difference between them other than one was allowed to be on stage while the other wasn't. Back then only his shy nature had stopped him.

Now he didn't know where that Will Graham had gone. The shy, retiring one who wouldn't have said boo to a goose. Now he was working with Freddie Lounds because he couldn't believe that if he walked up to Jack Crawford and said 'I think Hannibal Lecter isn't all he says he is' that Jack wouldn't laugh in his face. Or be angrier than a wet cat. In truth even he didn't know what the issue with Hannibal was, or if there even was one, but Alana's words from before stuck. *I always used to go with my gut*. Will thought that he should start.

In truth he was beginning to wonder what it would take to stop him these days. He closed that topic with a heavy swallow and a tight knit knot in his stomach and began unpacking the files one by one, pulling a box of tacks from his desk drawer.

No more rushing tension in his limbs, no more whispered words in his ear. Just nice, good, old fashioned deduction. Will stared at the large corkboard on his wall, now half filled with photographs of victims and crime scenes, scraps of notes, red tap marking possible routes for dumping the bodies (dumping, not *dumping*, it was so much more than that), phone numbers and folded reports. All placed atop a large map of Baltimore and the surrounding area. Those that lay outwith were placed on the periphery with the state's name tagged nearby the bustle of evidence.

Will picked up a picture of Andrew Caldwell, his pale body sliced neatly in two, and pinned him by the Dunbar High School bus parking lot.

Alive. Will stood back and looked at the board as it filled up. *Alive*. That was what it represented, more than anything. That was what it said. The Ripper was alive and well and watching them with

great amusement. Will looked down at his desk, at the victims still waiting to take their places on his mortuary map. Graham Lehrwood would be the last, *only not the last*, to take his place among them.

How many?The words rang in his mind, echoed.

How many?

Many more than Garrett Jacob Hobbs.

Will blinked, closing his eyes, rubbing at the soft flesh of his eyelids. The voice whispered to him and he could not place it. *The man in the doorway*. Not Sutcliffe, not that amiable yet superior tone. Yet he already knew it was not Sutcliffe, was not a man already dead. Was not what he wanted, what he needed it to be. Something awful, something truly more than his mind could take. *You don't remember?*

The knock at his door made Will start, turning sharply. He took a moment to catch his breath before speaking.

"Come in."

Jack entered sedately, without his usual lack of courtesy. Will found it telling that Jack had not simply knocked and walked in, as he normally did. Am I someone to be cautious of now? he thought. Ah, who am I kidding? I always have been.

"Got a minute?" Jack asked, even as his eyes flicked automatically to the growing picture on Will's wall, "that's some mosaic. You been here all night?"

"I came in early."

"You have Wells up as a victim?"

"What was the final cause of death?"

"Myocardial infarction. You think *he* did that too?"

"I know he did that too. Lots of ways to cause a heart attack without leaving a trace. Succinylcholine, wouldn't be out of place in a hospital, it's used when inserting breathing tubes. Ethylene glycol, doesn't show up except if specifically checked. Plenty more, none of which were tested for because they weren't expected; were not expected because we wouldn't think the Ripper could have killed him. Thus it becomes that he wasn't killed, was he. He just died of a heart attack, nice and simple, and we lost the only person in custody that could have identified the Ripper in a line up."

Jack did not speak. Will realised, on reviewing his little spiel, that he must have sounded incredibly condescending. He cleared his throat and changed the subject.

"What do you need?"

"Just an update on protocol," Jack said, seemingly unfazed by Will's attitude, "for reports and the like. We're not to refer to him as the Chesapeake Ripper. For now he's just an unsub, like everyone else."

“Purnell?” Will guessed.

“No prizes for guessing, and right now I’d rather stay on her good side,” Jack added with a slight shrug, “if she has one of those. Put it this way, we’re going to play this close to the chest and careful as with a naked flame, alright? No slip ups.”

“Any chance and she’ll close the lid on our fingers?”

“Pretty much,” Jack sighed, “and I...look, we’ve had our differences. We don’t need any more of those. You’ve been through enough shit and so have I. Still are, not that anyone will know that. I want this one, Will. Do you understand what that means?” Jack leaned on Will’s desk, staring ahead at the half shuttered window, “I *want* this guy.”

“I know Jack,” *So do I,* "like you said, we'll get him."

“Then we have to be clever. There’s no room for stupid mistakes. I feel like maybe we’ve been playing up till now, like kids in a sandpit. You said once that he was laughing at us. Sometimes I feel he’s had every right to. Treating this like it’s just another case when...”

Will ran a thumb tack between his fingers, careful of the sharp point. He would have interrupted, would have *corrected* Jack, if he didn’t think it would start a shouting match. The man was tight as a piano wire, vibrating with every note struck. And the Ripper was oh so expert a song-smith. He knew how to play them. *And I know how to compose a reply*, Will thought. He stayed quiet.

“Everything’s buried and forgotten as soon as we’ve done it,” Jack continued, “Not now, I won’t let him brush away his tracks again, not *again*.”

“Then we do the one thing that he won’t be able to resist.”

That had Jack’s attention. He frowned at first, still staring at the wall, before turning his gaze to Will, questioning. Will did not falter beneath it.

“I’m listening,” Jack said, taking a seat when Will offered it.

It was tempting to stay standing, because staying standing made this somehow less formal; less final. Will knew that Jack would agree to his plan even though he wouldn’t like it, mainly because of the four words he’d spoken minutes before: ‘*I* want *this guy’*. Failures aside, *danger* aside and, most importantly, morals aside, Jack would agree.

Which meant this would happen, as soon as he opened his mouth and suggested it. The control was momentarily heady, giving Will a warped sense of the room around him. *Power and need*. Something he couldn’t hold onto for fear of its very nature. *He liked the feel of it*. Will shook his head and sat down in his uncomfortable office chair, leaning forwards onto the desk. He clasped his hands.

“Tracks,” Will started simple, “Like you said, he’s too careful to leave them and without them we have nothing.”

“Right.”

“Then we have to find a way of making him feel he has no need to wash them away.”

“I...” Jack hesitated; Will imagined he was trying to decide whether to sideline Will before he got a chance to propose it, or simply seem as if he were conflicted but allow him to continue regardless, “...don’t like where this is going.”

The latter it was then, Will thought grimly.

“I know, but that doesn’t mean there’s anywhere else to take it.”

“I won’t risk any more of my people, he’s too...he’s too persistent for the odds to be fair.”

“The odds will never be fair, Jack,” Will said, sitting back and putting hand to his mouth; he rubbed at his lips before letting the hand gesture out towards the window, “he’s a phantom only because he sees us as brash, inferior and shambling. Humans compared to his more-than-human. He...the only way to trap him is with a...a good lure. The right lure. Get close to him. Have him become acclimatised. Be able to stand beside him without him thinking it’s a threat.”

“We keep going,” Jack shook his head vehemently, “we wear him down. He’ll *slip up* at some point Will. You’re not...”

“Slip up? Jack, please,” Will shook his head and regarded his superior with as much condescension as he would dare, “We can’t follow him into the woods, he’ll smell the scent of us. The traps he’ll set will be...vicious, irrevocable. You won’t be able to live with them. Enough. It’s enough that we’ve tried the conventional route; hunters sounding out the predator. We have to try something different, or we’ll be stuck. Forever stuck in this game.”

Silence told Will he had won before Jack could even voice it. The truth of the matter was in Jack himself: impatience, irritation, frustration, anger and hatred. Each was manageable when taken in turn. All at once they avalanched across morals and hang-ups and the thought of penalty it would bring, burying them in a pristine white reminiscent of blamelessness. Will would have his chance, and Jack would have to live with the consequences.

“You want him Jack?” Will asked, “I’m a good fisherman.”

Chapter End Notes

Points to anyone who can guess who killed Mr and Mrs Fisher. Or was it too obvious ;) ?

Extra points to anyone who might hazard a guess as to what Hannibal said to Matthew in their session together.

Super extra points to anyone who can guess where this is all going. Just kidding. I have a plan, I swear.

Thanks again to everyone who has reviewed or left a kudos, honestly you all make my day every time :) I'm so happy you're all enjoying reading it as much as I enjoy writing it! HUGS FOR EVERYONE!

Idée Fixe

Chapter Notes

> Apologies, I know this isn't the chapter I promised. However, as I was writing the next chapter I felt the need to explore Matthew's motivations a little so that things make more sense overall (sorry to those who aren't enjoying Matthew's character!). Also what happens here will be very important for later on. Please enjoy Hannibal and Matthew snarking at each other while it lasts.
>
> Title: "Idée fixe" - 'an unhealthy and compulsive preoccupation with something or someone: a persistent or obsessing idea,
> often delusional, that can, in extreme form, be a symptom of psychosis'

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Funny thing is,” Matthew said with true humour, “I’ve never been to a shrink before.”

“It sounds as if you feel this is something you should have considered sooner,” Lecter countered smoothly.

It was just as he had thought it would be; passive aggressive bullshit. He could deal with that. Dr. Lecter appeared to believe himself a dangerously powerful man, if his body language was anything to go by. Matthew liked the challenge. Taking people down a peg or two was a treat he savoured.

The room itself was vastly overblown. Shelves upon shelves holding leather bound books eventually leading up to a balcony of further pages, antiques placed upon pedestals like offerings, the furniture demurely expensive and richly upholstered; vanity you could cut with a knife, Matthew thought. *See this? All around you? You are not capable of this*. That was what it said to him. Yet said in such an ostentatious fashion that it became more than just a threat, it became a wall; a place to hide and watch from behind. He smiled, wondering if it was as obvious to anyone else that 'Dr. Lecter' was simply a veil behind which the man himself resided.

All those visits to Chilton’s office, with Lecter expertly pressing the idea into the man’s pliable head that Graham would be *perfect*. And willing, willing was the key. Willing under the right circumstances. Oh he was never open and forthright with it, never overt. Just a comment here of his time treating Will’s sickened mind, and then a few minutes later a prod at Chilton’s foray into rather less than sanctioned therapies. A lack of judgement went with those comments and even, at times, a subtle hint towards support. It hadn’t taken much. Steering Frederick towards the bull pen and then watching the man decide it had been his idea all along to pick up the red cloth and shake it at the beast.

Matthew knew because he, as Will had so tactfully put it, liked to listen at doors.

“Ah, maybe,” he replied with a forcedly self-conscious smile; he sat back further in the comfortable chair, *luxurious*.

“Perhaps this is a good place for us to begin,” Lecter said with a small, comforting smile in return, “is there any mitigating reason which brought you here today?”

The pretentious language fitted with the jigsaw of pretentious setting and pretentious host. Matthew decided to play along.

“My life’s becoming a bit of a patchwork, I guess. Problems all over.”

“Anything which you feel stands out above the rest?”

“Oh yeah,” Matthew let out a small laugh, looking around the room before returning his gaze to Lecter; unruffled and relaxed. Matthew felt that making the perfect shell crack would feel like hot ecstasy, “my love life isn’t the smoothest. In fact it’s frankly a mess.”

The barest glint in an eye; did he actually see it or was he merely hoping it was there? Wasn’t good enough, not enough to see. He felt like laughing because the situation was so far from what he’d expected to be doing that morning; and the man in the chair seemed nearer now than he’d ever been before. He’d never properly spoken to Dr. Lecter, not directly. Their brief phone conversation didn't count, wasn't the same as face to face. Other than that he'd only heard conversations second hand. Up close the man looked to him like the panther ready to pounce given the hint of slightest weakness, or one that would have if the bars of polite civility were not a barrier between them.

Matthew watched carefully. He liked to watch carefully. Liked to be patient. It was the only way the shy animals would ever consider coming closer. His dad had taught him that. How to be still and calm and let them come to you. The lemurs and the chipmunks; stand quietly for long enough and they’d sit on your shoulder to eat their food. Most animals could be fooled into mistaking foe for friend, or foe for an object not worth their interest. It simply took time and tolerance.

Yet now he felt he was abandoning his principles. *Who’s flashing the red cloth at the beast now, huh?* He felt like blaming this on Will. The man made him reckless where before he had been patient, but not only that; made him feel that recklessness was the better option. *He accepted red stained hands and vicious smiles*. Will had been the first to see under the facade he put forward and not run screaming. It was encouraging, although perhaps not in the way anyone would understand.

Never trust an ambitious man. He’ll push you onto the coals and walk across without mercy to reach his goal. Matthew had always hated his mother but, now that he was older, he could appreciate her wisdom. Hard lessons learned, memories of the all encompassing darkness of the basement, his hands beating on the door. Screaming to be let out. He’d learned fast and hard that you had to learn your place in life and stay there.

And now he wondered if anyone else had seen it yet, that hint of dangerous ambition in Lecter’s eyes. It glinted before him like a forbidden fruit, daring the innocent hand to reach out and pluck. Tender and ripe, succour for the soul. To be more than he was, *to be capable of all this*, to be someone looked up to, respected. Matthew had lived his life in the shadow of the woman who bore him and the man who she cowed. Now he found Lecter’s style slightly intoxicating, just as he did Will’s acceptance of him. He knew, just from the faintest sniff, that he wanted more; pressing forwards seemed elementary.

“I mean don’t get me wrong,” Matthew said casually, “my guy? He’s great. Don’t think most would think so but he’s unique, yeah? I just get the feeling that sometimes he’s lookin’ elsewhere.”

“And how does that make you feel?”

“Like wringing his damn neck,” Matthew grinned; and he had, *oh he had*, because his question had never been answered. ‘*Do I really gotta compete with Doctor god damned Lecter now?’* It had never been answered, never *fucking* answered! As far as Matthew could tell Will hadn’t been entirely oblivious to the fact that he had been lucky to come away clean that peaceful afternoon. Taking it out on the stupid fuck at the gas station had been easier, less messy somehow. Let him keep what was his without spoiling the mood. Will knew. Will knew what he was, but he’d made him dinner and they’d talked.

“*How many bones have you broken?” Will had asked as Matthew leaned back against his legs.*

“Never have, actually. I chipped my tooth when I was three.”

“Teeth aren’t bones.”

“Sure they are!”

It would have been incredibly normal, stupidly and wonderfully domestic, if Will’s eyes hadn’t been filled with thoughts of another. Sometimes Matthew allowed the want to hurt Will to worry him. Sometimes he didn’t. Sometimes he considered the consequences and weighed them up.

As for Lecter? Not a flicker, not a wince, not even a narrowing of the eyes as Matthew had said his piece; Lecter’s face appeared to be made from malleable steel, “Do you have thoughts like this often?”

“Oh yeah,” Matthew shrugged, “it’s ok inside the mind right? Fantasies. I heard it was healthy or somethin’. Cause then I can just imagine what my hands would be doing if I slipped, but at the same time I can keep him. Would hate to lose what I’ve got after all.”

“You feel you have something special together?”

Yeah, he wanted to say, yeah I’ve got something special. I just don’t know what to do with it and I’m fuckin’ terrified you’re gonna steal it back from me with your god damned bespoke furniture and haute cuisine. Instead, what came out was a carefully designed barb.

“Well he lets me finish in him,” Matthew shrugged, “must be true love, huh?”

And there it was, *oh there it was!* Matthew suppressed his triumph as he watched Lecter lift his hand with the pretence of rubbing at his nose, all to cover the twitch at the left side of his mouth. Matthew would admit he almost missed it, so expertly was it hidden. A curved violence visible like a flash in his downturned lip before it disappeared. A sign, an *alarm*; a want to surely use that hand to do more than push against soft, well groomed skin. So *he is human after all*, Matthew thought, *somewhere under all that pretence*.

And that’s how he sees him, isn’t it? he thought with glee, *Will Graham as the beautiful, tragic, flawed innocent who can’t escape all those demons inside. Someone who can be kept and placed, like his antiques, on a pedestal.* Matthew enjoyed the idea that he was tearing a gaping hole in Lecter’s own outrageous fantasy. Will was nobody’s ‘innocent’ as far as he was concerned. *Fuckin’ hell*, he thought, *this is easier than I’d hoped it would be*.

“Then you gauge your relationship purely on the physical,” Lecter continued, “Do you believe that is a healthy outlook?”

“Feelings get messy. If you can fuck without complication then you’ve got everything you need, don’t you?”

“And yet you told me that your love is the most unsettled area of your life at present. *Ah*,” barely a change in the face but for a seemingly knowledgeable sheen to the eyes, “I see,” Lecter nodded, looking down momentarily at his knee as he crossed his legs before looking back up, “this reliance upon the physical might be only enough for one of you, perhaps? And this is why you fear he may have a wandering eye. Why he is looking elsewhere, as you put it.”

An instant, barbed and pertinent comeback. *You can’t give him what this man could.* The barb was the same as the mocking diatribe he’d been given by the room itself as soon as he’d stepped foot in it. *You are not capable of this.* Matthew hoped that his reaction didn’t show on his face. *Gives as good as he gets doesn’t he,* Matthew thought with begrudging deference. It was too late that he realised he was gripping the leather arm of the chair a little too tightly. He let it go and relaxed. Lecter didn’t even have the good grace to look victorious, Matthew thought. No tit for tat, not playing by the rules. Lecter sat there: still, composed and unreadable.

“Maybe,” Matthew decided to answer blithely, standing up and walking aimlessly out into the room. The chair was a stifling and controlling element of Lecter’s space and he knew it. Being free of it could only help. He noticed Lecter follow his every movement in his peripheral vision, “although I suppose I shouldn’t really worry. This other guy? He fuckin’ hates his guts.”

“Then it seems you worry unnecessarily, and know you do so. Yet still this bothers you.”

“Yeah,” Matthew said, looking over at the mahogany desk beside the spiral staircase; he made for it slowly, leather creaking, “I suppose I can be the jealous type. I don’t like when people aren’t themselves.”

“Deception allows us a great freedom.”

“You mean lying. Don’t dress it up in pretty words.”

“You appear to detest the very idea, and yet you have done so since you entered my office.”

“What makes you think I’m lying to you?”

“I have no problem with you lying to me, Matthew,” Lecter said, face inscrutable, “we all wear masks.”

“Give a man a mask and he’ll tell you the truth?” Matthew laughed, “Said by a man who saw nothing but masks his whole life. I prefer straight talkin’. Gets places faster.”

“But not always to the right places.”

“And where’s the right place?” Matthew asked as he reached the desk, finding a pile of papers placed at the corner with wonderfully controlled precision; Matthew felt as if everything Lecter did might have that same quality; *control*. He imagined putting his hands around that control and tearing it in half, watching the man broken and gasping afterwards; it came with that familiar hot, slick feeling in his gut.

“Only you will know that,” Lecter said, watching him, “but you must know, Matthew, that your Eden might be another’s Hell. Morality removed from societal norms is utterly subjective.”

“And here I thought a shrink would be trying to calm my fears, work past my tendency to throw my fist first without thinking,” he said as he picked up the papers, finding an intricate and detailed sketch upon the first; he decided it was time to begin dropping the pretence, “Will certainly doesn’t know where the right place is. I kind of like that uncertainty.”

“It holds the allure of the undiscovered,” Lecter agreed without hesitation; Matthew was annoyed to find no resistance to the change, “it is why he draws so many explorers to him. Those who would step onto virgin territory and claim whatever they can reach first. What would you claim, Matthew, if you had the ability to find it?”

The insult wasn’t lost on him; *if you had the ability*. He lifted the first sheet and placed it back upon the desk haphazardly, hoping the lack of care would at least ruffle some of those pristine feathers.

“I don’t think I would,” he shrugged, pursing his bottom lip.

“I would dispute that.”

“Oh yeah?” Matthew threw Lecter a sarcastic glance as he dropped another sketch to the wood, “What would it be then? I’m dying to know.”

“His eyes, I imagine.”

Fucking cunt. The thought was immediate, worryingly so. Matthew licked his lips thickly as he looked down at a group of men, outlined in charcoal greys, one holding the other close in a dying embrace as the others looked on in grief. He felt like tearing it down the middle, hearing the paper rip. He thought of Will, that night at the bar as those *eyes* had seen right through him and that *mouth* had told him exactly what he was. The night Will saw him and Matthew felt the electric thrill of what that meant.

Only with Dr. Hannibal Lecter the thrill tasted sour. The man was watching him with the same intensity Will did sometimes, when his mind wondered but his eyes stayed open and allowed Matthew to peer inside; demons and blood and someone else’s stare. He liked to imagine Lecter was wondering what kind of death would be least pleasant to inflict upon his person. As if those upper-class hands had ever held a knife that wasn’t destined to chop truffles and goose liver, Matthew thought, smirking.

“No wonder he can’t stand talkin’ to you anymore,” Matthew scoffed as Lecter stood, brushing his hands down the front of his suit, “it’s like sticking your foot in a bear trap.”

“Do you know the etymology of the word pupil, as in of the eye?” Lecter continued as if Matthew had not spoken, “From the Latin - little girl, or doll. It refers to the mirror the eye represents, reflecting a minute image of the one who looks upon its surface. I think that is what you would seek in Will.”

I feel like I should think myself stupid to believe I could come to a psychiatrist and not end up having the truth shoved in my face. Matthew wanted to break something, but the part of him that liked to win, that liked to lie in wait, held him back. He let the sketch float down to the desk, making a warped sound of unrolled paper as it went. The next revealed a slim street from an unknown city, curlicue lampposts lining the gothic houses and cobbles upon the ground.

He had to think quickly and he had to go with his gut. *Why would Lecter even bring it up in the first place if he didn’t feel the same?* It was too hasty an assessment of Matthew otherwise. Lecter had

seen in him something that he was himself. Matthew knew he wasn't exactly at Will's level when it came to reading people, but he prided himself on being sharp.

"Sounds like you're one who'd know," he said, watching Lecter closely.

"Perhaps," Lecter said, reaching out to trace his finger above the sketch which had fallen closest to him, never quite touching the paper, "Self-knowledge can be obtained only by looking into the mind and virtue of the soul, which is the diviner part of a man; as we see our own image in another's eye. What is it you see in the mirror Matthew?"

"What do you see?" he asked defensively, throwing down another sheet; a half finished bust, outlines of head and shoulders, a vague hint of eyes and lips.

"If you wished to discuss myself then perhaps I should have invited you to dinner."

"How civilised. It sounds fuckin' dreadful," another sheet gone, this one slipping over the edge and fluttering to the floor; the new sheet showed a female nude laid against suspended folds of material, dark hair spilled in waves of onyx ink.

"Please answer the question."

"I don't have to give you shit..."

There would have been more. He would have given more, made it crude just so it would irritate that superior sensibility. Make him frown with displeasure, if that was even possible. Make Lecter regard him with disdain; more disdain than he already did. Do something to break out the person hiding under that ridiculous suit and behind his thickly layered gentility. Make him break because then Matthew would know that he had won here, even if he couldn't win where it mattered.

There would have been more, had the next sheet of cream paper not revealed to him Lawrence Wells as Matthew had found him over half a year ago in the infirmary of the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. A perfect reconstruction of the man, arms strung up to his bedposts, eyes wide and mouth gasping its last breaths, the sheet of paper pinned to his chest, *Matthew could still remember the feel of it between his fingers,* piercing the flesh.

He stared and his mouth could not speak. Blinking did not erase the sketch, turn it into some innocuous nude or landscape or city street.

No one knew, was all Matthew could think in his panic. No one had known about how Wells had been found because Matthew had cleaned up. He'd cleaned up because he'd been the orderly in charge of the hospital wing that afternoon, and after Carol had been attacked and murdered by Gideon it was well known among the staff that the next falter, the next misstep or lax responsibility, the next *incident* meant being kicked to the kerb. Fired faster than he'd been hired, which was pretty damn fast, and he wouldn't find another job, and he *wouldn't* work for his dad. No way in hell, no way in *hell* was he working for that weak piece of shit that couldn't even stand up for himself, never mind his own son.

So he had checked Wells' non-existent pulse, he had looked around to make sure he was alone, and then he had untied hands, unpinned the paper and stuffed it in his pocket, settled the area and cleaned up the small amount of blood. Put him back into bed all nice and snug. Then he'd raised hell by calling upstairs to Chilton, letting him in on the emergency. After all was said and done he

had tried to resuscitate Wells, just to keep consistency with post mortem bruising. No one could say he hadn't tried. By then it had been too late but it didn't matter because no one knew.

No one knew. Matthew stared at the paper for longer than he should. *Christ, oh fucking Christ*.

Everything seemed suddenly quiet. He looked up sharply with only his eyes, staying stock still, catching sight of Lecter watching him dispassionately. After a moment of eyes meeting eyes, Hannibal extended his hand to ask for the sketch. Matthew's mind raced. *Fuck, fuck, fuck I don't believe this. Why's he standing there? Why's he just standing there?* With a slowness bred of tension Matthew picked up the paper by its short edge and placed it in Lecter's hand. Long fingers closed around it, barely dimpling the surface.

"Not my best work," Lecter said critically, narrowing his eyes slightly and pursing his lips before he straightened, "a little heavy on the shading. I feel it detracts from the serenity, adds a little too much severity; it sheds a maudlin air."

"Who told you about this?" Matthew cleared his throat when his words came out as nothing but a hoarse whisper, "Who *the fuck* told you about this?"

"I am disappointed, Matthew," Lecter shook his head, "I had not realised you were, in fact, duller than I had first anticipated."

"You *fuckin*..!"

And it sank in. Sank in like the sudden drop when the chair is pulled from under you, or the trip forwards with nothing to grab onto as hands flail. A pitch in the stomach that is both elation and fear crushed together into a nauseating combination. *Not my best work*. The words played again and again. *Oh god*, Matthew thought, *this is nuts. It can't be. This is totally fuckin' nuts*. Everything seemed to shift upon its axis until the world was atilt. Matthew felt as if the bars of polite civility had suddenly been opened and he was about to find out if Will was right; whether stereotyping would hold the panther in check, or his throat was to be torn from his body.

"You're the Chesapeake Ripper," Matthew said because there was nothing else he could say.

Lecter hadn't been entirely right. Will's eyes captured him not only because they mirrored, not only that. Lecter had missed the fact that Will's eyes were beautifully expressive. When Will felt something it could be caught in his gaze before it was heard in his words or read in his body language. Will's eyes exposed him all the way down to his core, if one knew what to look for.

Lecter, in contrast, was the perfect mirror. A sheet of plate steel hid behind maroon and pitch. No way through, no way out; and Matthew stared. He couldn't help but stare and wonder *what is it you see in the mirror Matthew?* His body hummed with euphoric terror. So close, it's true isn't it, he was so *close* to him now. Lecter had been stripped of the skin of the haughty, repressed, neurotic psychiatrist with a taste for power. Now the Chesapeake Ripper stood before Matthew in his human suit and gave him back his own reflection.

"And what would give you that impression?" Lecter asked demurely.

"No one else saw this," Matthew explained calmly, quietly, unable to raise his voice, "No one else knows cause I didn't say a word to anyone. And the Ripper killed him cause Wells knew his face, everyone knew that. The FBI knows it. You...you drew this from memory."

“I have always been told I have a very good memory. As well as a vastly overactive imagination. Which is this, I wonder?”

“Why’re you showin’ me this? I could call the cops. I could call the cops right now and...”

“And show them a sketch of an unreported crime which you yourself appear to have covered up. Tampering with a crime scene, that’s a third degree felony if I’m not mistaken. Coupled with your previous criminal history I do not think it would go well for you Matthew. I, myself, would be far more fortunate in that regard. I doubt, on the evidence of a pencil sketch, that I would be indicted for the murder of Lawrence Wells which, as it currently stands, was not a murder at all as he died of a heart attack; natural causes. Of course if you are determined to do your civic duty the phone is to your right. In fact I have Jack Crawford’s office number in my rolodex, if you would prefer something with a little more punch than the local beat cop.”

A sudden chill broke over Matthew’s forehead. He could feel the sweat there. The room still seemed alight with courtesy and politeness, only now with the added razor edge that he felt was slicing into his neck and knees, making it difficult to move or look away. Lecter tipped his head to the right and ran his oddly coloured eyes across Matthew’s face and torso. Matthew swallowed. The predator had seen him and was simply waiting for the weakness to show. Ready to tear and rend when the guard was let down. What came out of his mouth next was part fear, part victory and part subconscious elation.

“I don’t think I will.”

“Oh?” Lecter asked, seeming mildly curious.

“I’m a big fan.”

Lecter’s smile was the most genuine action he had seen of the man yet. It tinkered with the idea of going somewhere near his eyes, although it never truly made it. Matthew wondered if that disconnect was what might have drawn Will in the first instance. *You’re a sphinx*. Will’s words. He could see them here.

He could see.

It had been an easy choice because he’d already seen him around before. Once at his local Seven Eleven, another at the late night garage at the end of the street. Even once at his father’s zoo. Matthew had spoken to him then. Nothing but directions. *Second on your left and then turn right.* He had smiled in return, waving a hand in thanks. Pretty blonde young thing on his arm. Ring on her finger.

Young, married and happy. Day at the zoo. Life on the up. None of it mattered. He had wondered, briefly, how the, what had they called him? Angel of Mercy? Stupid fucking name. Still, he wondered how he’d chosen them. His victims. Did they have significance? Were they people he knew? He should have asked Will, hassled him for details.

The blood was running quick and fast through his veins, making his ears hum if he focused on the beat. *Thrum, thrum, thrum*. Yet he felt calm. Calm and collected. Easy and loose. Anticipation itched in his fingers. *Front page, it’ll be front page*, he couldn’t help thinking. Will would be here,

wouldn't he, he'd come here and walk over where his feet had been and stare down at what he'd done with his eyes.

Those god damned eyes.

As he rang the doorbell he shifted the medic uniform a little more into place with his other hand. Easy to swipe it from the store at the asylum, no one kept a good eye on the stock. Wouldn't be checked until laundry Thursday. He licked his lips as he heard footsteps approaching. He heard the lock click open and the door swing wide, saw a bright smile and pearly teeth under kind, brown eyes.

"Can I help..?" she asked, voice high and lilting, "Oh my, has there been an accident?"

"Oh, no maam," Matthew smiled reassuringly, "I hate to bother you but I've actually just broken down and I wondered if I could use your phone to call back to the hospital? You see I can't get any reception out here and if I don't keep up my schedule..."

"No, not at all, of course, let me just fetch you the phone," she turned to go back inside, "it's impossible to get reception in Westhill, drives me crazy, I always have trouble myself and..."

Matthew's smile ticked higher. He felt the crowbar up his sleeve and let it drop down as he stepped inside, sliding neatly into the palm of his hand. He felt made for this moment, made for this purpose. Aspiration and lust for more, pushing him onwards. Lecter had lured him in as a rival and then the Ripper had lured Matthew out from inside himself. Out of the dark cellar he had been hiding inside for decades past, beating to get free. Enough waiting and wanting and lusting and feasting on his imagination alone. This was the time for more. The time for ambition to drive him at last.

Dr. Lecter's words from the previous day rang in his mind, drowning out the woman's voice as Matthew stepped over the threshold of the Fisher residence.

"Killing must feel good to God too. He does it all the time. We must walk in his light and yet, without a little darkness, divinity is so difficult to trap. Everyone wants to feel as God does, Matthew, it is humanity's greatest failing: not knowing that they already do. Some of us are simply more accepting than others."

Chapter End Notes

And yes, Matthew did turn up at Will's door that night after he had killed the Fishers. Oh dear indeed...

Leur Font du Mal ou Leur Causent du Tort (la troisième partie)

Chapter Notes

Sorry this took so long to come out. I had some of my other stories to update and this chapter was rather a tricky one, which I'm sure you'll understand once you get to the end. Apologies well in advance.

Also, because Organized+Chaos requested it, this is how I imagined Will when he attends Hannibal's party:

http://www.hotflick.net/flicks/2009_Adam/009ADM_Hugh_Dancy_032.jpg

Title translation: Leur Font du Mal ou Leur Causent du Tort (la troisième partie) - 'Do Them Wrong (Part Three)'

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"The mind is its own place, and the places inhabited by the insane and the exceptionally gifted are so different from the places where ordinary men and women live, that there is little or no common ground of memory to serve as a basis for understanding or fellow feeling. Words are uttered but fail to enlighten. The things and events to which the symbols refer belong to mutually exclusive realms of experience.

To see ourselves as others see us is a most salutary gift. Hardly less important is the capacity to see others as they see themselves."

Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception*

They wrestled together, flesh twisted beneath grasping hands in straining silence. He could not, he *would not*. It was anathematic, that was what it should be. He should feel hate and loathing and disgust. That was what he should *feel*.

One strong arm slipped around his back, bringing a tight hand to the base of his skull. He kept himself small, compact, and threw his right arm around Hannibal's neck, pressing the other tightly up between their bodies, pushing the knife just above the expensive material of his collar.

A blink. A rush. *A dream-come-memory*. He pressed harder, his breathing coming in a stuttering stream as the flesh dimpled beneath the slim blade. His teeth clenched. Suddenly there was a hand around his wrist, restraining. Will looked up, meeting Hannibal's eyes with ease.

"You do not remember," Lecter said somewhat incongruously, "do you. And why should you? It was nothing from your perspective, and yet everything from mine."

"Tell me *why*."

“This was as you always expected it to be, or I would already be dead and would no longer understand why it was you looked at me the way you did. That night,” Will watched a small smile creep to Hannibal’s lips, “it was a pleasure to watch you delude yourself.”

“You think I won’t do it. You think I won’t, but you don’t know how many times I’ve imagined seeing your blood run and your eyes dim and *not given a good god damn*.”

“Oh, unlike you I do not enjoy delusion. Delusion is for the weak minded. Not for me. Not for you. Those who see beyond the lines left uncrossed,” his voice became a hoarse whisper, “The way you look at me now, it is the same.”

The knife edged closer as Will grit his teeth and held his breath, straining, tensing, crushing against the returning strength in Hannibal’s arms and legs and his calm, steady stare.

“The same. The *same*,” his voice came as a whisper, “I can’t, I just...*please*.”

“The same, and yet different. It is simple, beautifully so, enough that I can ask it in one question alone.”

His breath stuttered, his foot slipped. The twisted ball of arms and hands and friction that they were was compromised and the knife slid forcefully against his tanned throat. Will couldn’t help but close his eyes and suck in the smell. The heady scent was powerful on the air; *blood*.

“Tell me Will.”

Not a mote of pain or anger or fear leaked into Hannibal’s voice. Will would have believed him completely composed, were it not for the underlying need present in his tone.

“Tell me how it felt to watch him die.”

One week earlier

“It doesn’t bother you? Not even a little?” Beverly asked.

It took all his patience not to snap out the same reply he’d given twice before now, once when they’d first pulled up the records on their latest victims and again over lunch. Trapped in the elevator Will knew he didn’t have the luxury of simply saying he had somewhere to be and walking off. Instead he was forced to watch the floors tick by and rub at the bridge of his nose, eyes scrunched shut.

“Even if it did, not much I can do about it, is there,” he replied eventually.

“No,” Beverly said, “but it might be important, don’t you think? And if it is then at least admitting it to yourself would be a start.”

Will sighed, resting his head back against the smooth, cold metal of the elevator wall. When he spoke it was clearly and concisely and with a delicate edge of malevolent indifference.

“Mr. Fisher doesn’t look that much like me.”

“He looks enough like you for it to be noticeable,” Beverly pressed on, pausing before giving him a sidelong frown, “and *Mr. Fisher*? Since when did you stop using full names?”

“I’m just...” he let out a long, tight breath and thought of Jack’s words, “...compartmentalising.”

“Oh great, now even you’re believing the propaganda.”

“You think it’d be better if I didn’t?”

“I think you can’t. Never have, that’s what makes you so much better at this than Jack. And now you’re distancing yourself because you’ve seen what I’ve seen and it scares you.”

“I’m sorry, is this meant to be reassurance? Of any kind?” Will bit out, refusing to look Beverly in the eye, “Because I’m not having the best day and this is not helping.”

“Best *day*? Try best week. What you think just because you’re walking on your own now that you’re back to normal? You still look like shit.”

“Fucking great,” he muttered as the elevator juddered, dinged and the doors slid open.

He stepped out into the hive and avoided the bees as they swarmed around him expertly carrying folders, bundles of paper, gripping headsets or talking into phones. The fifth floor was alight with activity as they dealt with the surge that the recent killings had cost them.

Will tried not to let it get to him. He couldn’t, because losing focus now meant letting everything which had happened, everyone who had died, be entirely in vain. Sometimes *that* got to him. Today he wouldn’t let it. It was draining, and he had little left to give. He was reaching the point, the drop. He could feel it in his lethargic steps, in his restless shoulders. The jerkiness to his movements; he felt edgy. A lack of ability to believe in anything outside of himself, as if no one else could possibly understand what he was seeing or know what it was even if he explained it. A loss of belief in others. Will didn’t like it; it smacked of dissonance.

And he could read it in more than just his posture and his misanthropy. The crowd was making him antsy. Too many people, too close, all noise and eyes. It seemed to beat in from every side, every corner. Will could hear Brahm on the tip-line, fielding a call that sounded either bogus or time wasting, hurried past Conrad and another agent he’d never seen before crowded by the screen of a computer as it drew up areas of overlap on a map of Baltimore, looking for the killer’s likely haunts.

So knocking and entering without waiting for a reply made perfect sense to him, even if Crawford perhaps wasn’t entirely in agreement. Will would have felt embarrassed in succumbing to his own peculiarities, if the other occupant of the room hadn’t been cut off mid sentence; the start of which had been,

“Will *can’t*...”

Alana snapped her mouth shut and turned to him, the hands on her hips sliding to twist around her torso. She looked defiant, face tightly closed. Jack, who Will was sure should have been biting out something about getting out of his office *now*, merely sat back with a sigh and clasped his hands. Will stood stock still with Beverly behind him. The outcome seemed bleak, enough that it verged on a black comedy.

“I’m sorry,” he said tightly, his face twisting in the semblance of an awkward smile; his eyes stayed cold, “am I interrupting?”

And he knew how it would be taken. He knew Alana’s eyes would darken and her mouth tighten, a slight downturn to the corners of pink lips and a straightening of shoulders. *Am I interrupting?* He hadn’t been able to stop himself, knowing she would hear her own words. Knowing how he felt because she already had.

“Will, maybe you’d better come in and close the door. Beverly, would you mind giving us a minute please?”

“Sure,” Will heard her say, unconvincingly, before the door was shut behind him.

A short silence in which Jack offered him a seat with a raised hand, and Will shook his head. He crossed his arms and smirked contemptuously. What a joke, he thought, what a fucking joke this all is. Somehow his paranoia seemed to be laughing at him for being so scathing of its presence in his life. Now who’s let the fox out among the chickens? it chuckled.

“So,” he said, fixing his stare on Alana, “dare I ask what I can’t be doing?”

“Dr. Bloom has come to me with some...” Jack hesitated when Will did not turn to look at him, eyes fixed on Alana,“some concerns about your...”

“About my ability to be on this case and remain objective, am I right?” Will finished hastily, wanting to be right even as he hated the thought.

“I was thinking more about your mental health,” Alana said steadily, “considering all that has happened to you, and your recent conduct at work, it seems imprudent that you would just throw yourself back into the next big thing that comes along.”

“Throw myself in,” Will said the words as if they were slightly confusing, “meaning you think I’m being reckless for the sake of what exactly? My ego?”

“Funny, I didn’t think you had one of those,” Alana said flatly, “I hadn’t been informed of your return to work until...” she stalled, eyes flicking away even as Will remembered Hannibal’s words, *‘just some unresolved work issues’;* he was glad she wasn’t willing to bring up just where and how she knew, “well, let’s just say that I would have thought it would be clear to anyone with any common sense that putting you under this magnitude of stress and pressure...”

“Is the only way to keep me from going mad,” Will rolled back on his heels, untwining himself in order to put his hands in his pockets; he looked to Jack, “I doubt you called this in.”

“*No*,” Jack said, a puff of dry humour, “but it’s not the first time I’ve heard the argument. Need I remind you, Dr. Bloom, that as a consultant Will is free to choose his own contracts. I am not able to influence his work ethic.”

“You could always *not* hire him,” Alana said, incredulous, “and if you cared one iota about his health you would have. But you don’t, do you.”

“Alana...” Will tried to cut in.

“And neither do you,” she continued, turning to fix him with a stare, “you would happily see yourself break down again before you take this seriously. Is that what you want? A repeat of two thousand and seven?”

“Oh we’re bringing that up *now*,” Will shook his head, laughing derisively, “and not back when I was actually losing my mind,” they both looked distinctly uncomfortable; Will carried on regardless, “Just *now,* when I feel lucid enough to make my own decisions. Can I just remind you that having a nervous breakdown doesn’t mean you leave your life behind and start anew? I couldn’t cope, I got over it, and it was seven years ago. Falling off the horse,” he said with a tip of his head, “precedes getting back on the horse.”

“You can only get back on the horse if you aren’t paralysed from the neck down.”

“Paralysed?” Will shook his head, unable to stop the scowl twisting his face, “what kind of word is that to...paralysed? For god’s sake.”

“You’re already in regular therapy, Will, what else should I choose?”

“And you would know that, how exactly?” he asked, until it dawned on him; he looked at her, angrily blank, “You would have been the last person I would expect to find in Chilton’s esteemed company.”

“I didn’t hear it from Chilton,” she said daringly.

“I...” Will took a deep breath, gritting his teeth, and knew who she meant, “this is...*don’t* bring him into this.”

“A little late for that,” Alana said, “and anyway, would you really expect him to be secretive about you?”

Using you, were her words left unuttered, using you like he used me.

“Enough,” Will bit out, fixing her with a fierce stare.

“Look, I think we’re getting a little off topic,” Jack said authoritatively, “can we bring this back? You’re concerns are noted, Dr. Bloom, but as you can see Will is more than happy to continue with us. And he’s got support, we haven’t just, as you say, thrown him back in.”

“You mean Chilton,” she scoffed, “and Hannibal. Of course *he* doesn’t mind.”

“And what exactly is that supposed to mean?” Jack asked.

“Oh, you know,” Alana said, turning to look at Will as if sharing a secret, “Chilton’s always been dying to interview you, after all.”

Right, Will thought, insulted. Chilton, sure. He knew what she meant, he knew all too well. *Hannibal*. Lost and not lost, but barely ever found. He didn’t want to say he had him, although he couldn’t say the same for himself in return. Alana had been ensnared. A quick slip of a hook into the skin. Will knew that Hannibal always created the most skilled and enigmatic of barbs, just in the same way as he knew he was more than capable of being ensnared. Or, in his case, more than willing.

For a moment he wished he could tell her his plan, his thrown together plan, so she could shoot it down in flames and force him to stop. Anger kept his mouth shut.

When he looked at Jack out of the corner of one critical eye, he knew Alana had piqued the man's lust for a ruse. He had the look of a man who'd just realised he wasn't in-the-know.

"If we're quite done here," Will said, purposefully keeping his eyes on Jack as he raised the manila folder in his right hand.

"Price got something?" Jack asked, even if it clearly wasn't the question he wanted to.

"Less than you'll be happy with," Will said with a wry twist to his lips, "I'll let Jimmy explain it. Makes him feel special."

He didn't spare either of them a second glance before turning and leaving the office. Beverly pushed away from the wall, uncrossing her arms, and followed him. They'd been loud enough that he knew she'd heard. From personal experience he knew it was easy to listen at Jack's door.

"You ok?" he heard her ask as they pushed back through the busy office, Will flinching at every touch.

"No," he said bluntly, wishing he had the energy to lie.

Silence. Will bit at the inside of his lip, feeling a sore spot that he'd bitten a little too hard earlier. *Stressed*. Will heard it in Alana's voice. He leaned his head back against the cool wall and looked up at the bright, fluorescent lights. Will had only half listened as Price had explained to Jack that there were no prints to speak of. It had seemed sensible to be as aloof as possible, especially after Brian made an offhand comment which mirrored Beverly's concerns.

'*Kinda looks a bit like you, huh?'* Brian had said with a pursed lip as he flicked his eyes over Greg Fisher's face. No more came of it, and Will hadn't answered, even as Beverly watched them both. He hated that her concern only made him angry. *She's your friend*. Somehow that word didn't seem to cut it anymore. Too much was at stake to allow familiarity as a be all and end all.

It was the sound of the projector being turned off that brought him back from his daze.

"So what do we have?" Jack was asking, "DNA from Fisher?"

"Not enough to run a comparison," Brian looked uncomfortable, "thought we might get some LCN DNA samples from his wrists but it's difficult to take touch-DNA from skin once it's been tampered with. Get's messy. I'm guessing he either wiped down the places he knew he'd left himself behind, or he's taking more than just hobby tips from the Ripper."

"No sign of the murder weapon?" Jack asked.

"Nothing yet, but we still have officers scouring the local dump sites," Beverly said, "any local bins, skips, rivers."

Another silence. Will looked back down from his study of the ceiling to find Jack watching him. *Snake's eyes*. He felt heavy underneath them.

“Anything to add?” Jack said.

“You want the full package?”

“Wouldn’t mind.”

He took a breath, rubbing at his cheek. The stubble scratched against his fingers, a little longer than he usually let it grow. Go through the steps, he told himself. At least it would be a distraction.

“I think,” Will started slowly as he collated the data in his head, “that we’re dealing with a young, Caucasian male, twenty to thirty, no older. He’s attractive, charming, puts people off their guard. But he’s also forgettable, a face that wouldn’t stick. He’s athletic, enough to overpower Mr. Fisher who, just looking at his muscle mass, was fit and in shape. Not easy to wrestle a man like that to the ground and hold him down, even if he was concussed. I think he’ll be calm and arrogant, enough to give him confidence but not to put people off. Underneath it all he’s violent, not quick to throw a punch but he likes it. He gets off on it.”

The silence had turned rapt, but Will didn’t have time to savour the attention. He looked up to find Jack watching him doubtfully, hand loosely on his hips. He wanted the explanation, Will thought to himself, and now he resents me for it. Will ploughed on regardless.

“If you want to fight me on that, feel free, but I’ve yet to see a rapist who kills his victims that doesn’t get off on the thought of violence,” Jack didn’t say anything but Will could see him shift, subtly, “He’ll have been in prison before, seems unlikely that someone capable of this sort of violence would skip straight from clean living to a rape and double homicide. Probably minor offences, theft, assault. Maybe even animal deaths in the family. The parents ignored it because they didn’t want the hassle, so we’re looking for someone who would want to hide a scandal. They were probably controlling of him; he might even have been adopted.”

“How’d you figure?” Brian spoke up, frowning.

“Just an educated guess,” Will shrugged, “he has identity issues, or he wouldn’t be mimicking another’s crimes. He wouldn’t be showing himself up as Lehrwood, or as the Ripper. He’d be making his own mark. So he lacks confidence, and he’s acting out. Like he wants to impress someone rather than just live out the fantasy he’s constructed. He wants a father figure to look up to, and he wants the acceptance of a mother’s love. He’s immature, lacking a role model. As far as how he does it, well I figure he works somewhere he can get access to a uniform that would be believable enough to get him inside someone’s house. So we’re either looking at fancy dress, seems an unlikely risk to take if he were called out on it, or he works in some sort of law enforcement or maybe medical facility. And, yeah...that’s all I’ve got.”

“Alright,” Jack nodded, “then we have more than we thought. If you’re right then he won’t be hiding himself with any care. Someone that arrogant and inexperienced, part of him will want to be caught so he can show off.”

“Unless he’s got something to lose,” Will said; when Jack fixed him with a harsh look Will swerved the argument he could feel building, “We need more evidence. He’s an amateur, no matter how professional he hopes he is. He’s left something behind, something somewhere that he thinks doesn’t matter. I’m going back to Westhill.”

“No, I want you back at Beech Grove industrial estate,” Jack said quickly.

Will blinked, sidelined. It took him a moment to find his bearings. “Lehrwood’s dump site?” he asked, “What the hell do you think I’m going to find there?”

“Something to get you back on track,” Jack said forcefully, “I didn’t bring you here just to chase off after the first thing that catches your eye. You’re here to help us find the Ripper. So you do that.”

“Then why’d you..?” Will bit his tongue and smiled flatly. Great, he thought, that’s just great. Alana’s worries had obviously done more damage than he’d realised. He took a breath and tried to ignore the obvious unease of the others in the room, “alright. Alright then I’ll get right on that.”

Will looked down at the three steel autopsy slabs sitting in the middle of the room; Lehrwood’s first kill, an IT consultant named Dan Carey, followed by Lehrwood himself, followed by Fisher. Will blinked as he focused on the trio, wetting his lips as he easily marked out the differences just from the rugged, dried stumps where limbs once hung.

Carey was torn, angry, a desecrated corpse; Lehrwood had his own purpose, his own design. He was the original, but his work was not the pinnacle of what could be achieved.

That was seen in Lehrwood himself, almost an antithesis to the original kills even though the similarities were obvious; the cuts on Lehrwood’s body were utterly precise and clean. The only brutality came from the kill itself and the method of dismemberment.

When Will looked to Fisher he shook his head, letting out a small laugh. Fisher looked liked a paltry imitation, a child tracing a masterwork.

He looked up as Jack left, followed by Beverly, while Price and Brian began wheeling the trio back into their cells. He wondered if he was the only one to see the connections linking every thread dangling from their cut flesh; and, at the centre, the Chesapeake Ripper sat, a fat spider bloated on pride and conceit.

And wearing a face Will wished he could not recognise. One he would not allow himself to believe, even as his fractured memories and infernal instincts screamed at him from every level of the arena.

The day was a slipping drift of cold, grey walls and bright street lights and brown soil on crumbling asphalt where the weeds had pushed through. The wind had whipped at his face, throwing hair into his eyes. He’d brushed it away and pulled his scarf tighter while he had let his mind drink in the calm, dead atmosphere. Will had stood in Beech Grove and felt the need to reflect.

The Ripper had chosen this place because it was perfect. Not only abandoned, but also far enough from the main road that it was unlikely a car would wind up there by accident, and no passer-by would include it in their evening walk. All that was left of the industries that had set up camp there years ago were all clapped out buildings, covered in graffiti and wooden chip board warped by the rain.

He had stood in the centre of the old roads, marked out only by the edges of brown weeds and rocks, like a garden path after a nuclear fallout. Staring at the patch where Lehrwood had been found, displayed for no one to see, Will had wondered if the Ripper would have managed to get away with doing it in broad daylight. *Would he?*He wondered. It was enough to pass the time thinking about it, even as he drove back to Quantico.

Two and a half hours trying to think of some way to squeeze some substance out of Beech Grove, trawling for witnesses who might not have come forwards, *dog walkers, squatters, homeless, junkies*. Nothing had paid off. The place was a void, an exotic wasteland that had slipped under the radar of nearly every soul in the city. But the Ripper knew it, he thought. In the end that was the only clue he was left with. Who would know about Beech Grove? And the answer to that held their killer in its grasp.

It's not the only one. Will had hated the thought, even as it constantly inserted itself into his processes. His nightmares also spat it at him, as he woke with the last remnants of a man and a voice and his own petrified limbs clawing at his consciousness. Then it would stutter and he would get up and he would splash the freezing winter water on his face and, *pah*, it was gone. Sliding away like the water, soaked up into the towel until all that was left was a damp patch; he could remember it was there, but the memory was nothing more than a slightly different shade of normal.

Only there were those that stuck. Those he could remember even if he couldn't stand the thought of them. *True or false, right or wrong, black or white*. Will knew he wasn't a binary thinker, he dealt in laterals and interlacing. Too much all crushed together in an organised chaos. Now, faced with the dilemma of being forced to choose, he found that he couldn't. Stuck in the grey area, the middling malaise, he felt lost. Apathetic to the hideousness it represented but, above all, lonely in its bleak landscape.

For the first time since he'd begun to remember, he thought he might have felt how the Ripper showed himself to be through his choices.

It was dark by the time he returned home to find the lights on, throwing the surrounding snow into a crisp grey. Will sat in his car long enough to begin feeling cold, his eyes closed and his hands on the wheel. Forgot to pick up the spare keys from under the mat didn't you, he berated himself.

Eventually he found the energy to step out, the ground hard and frozen beneath his boots. When he unlocked the door only Winston and Lenny came running, tails wagging and tongues lolling. He could hear the television playing low from the living room. Running his hands over eager fur, Will walked with the dogs until he found what he was looking for.

"You were out late," Matthew said, seated on the couch and surrounded by the rest of the pack; some jumped up at the sight of him, others, too comfortable it seemed, offered nothing more than a thumping wag. Will crouched down to ruffle Lady's fur, looking up only when he felt eyes on him, "I took 'em for a walk. And did dinner. They wouldn't shut up till I did."

"What are you doing here?" Will asked bluntly.

"I think we've been over this," Matthew said, picking up the remote and muting the tv, "either that or you have some allergic reaction to phones. Is that it? Cause you know by now I think I'd buy it."

"I'm not..." Will wasn't sure where the rest of the sentence was meant to go. He felt he'd been having that problem with Matthew a lot lately. He sighed, standing up and taking off his coat, "how are the pups?"

"They're alright," Matthew shrugged, keeping his eyes on Will, "asleep. Ran themselves ragged earlier, little terrors. What you gonna do with 'em? Once they're bigger I mean."

“Not sure,” Will said, hanging his jacket on a nearby chair, “give them to people who’ll look after them I suppose.”

“Think you’re a good judge of that?”

“I hope so.”

“You look tired. Want me to make you somethin’?”

“You shouldn’t be here,” Will said, stopping in the middle of the room, “I can’t do this anymore.”

Silence, broken only by shifting paws and his blunt force trauma change in conversation; domestic to destructive. Even the distraction of the shifting light from the tv in the dark room was enough to make the silence more pronounced. Will crossed his arms. Matthew stared straight ahead, rubbing at his right temple. Will felt a sudden urge to grab him by the neck and throw him from his house. He sucked in a calming breath and rubbed at the back of his neck, shaking the thoughts away.

It had been a long day, in more ways than one. A day that laughed in his face and asked him just who he thought he was, considering no one seemed to trust him anymore. No use at his job, or his life. No way to catch the smoke he was trying to grab with bare hands because the Ripper felt closer than he should and Will wasn’t sure if that was good or not. It had never been a promising sign in the past, but Will wasn’t sure what to do with the knowledge that he was slipping dangerously close to indifference.

He looked back to the couch and felt vaguely ill at the fact that he was telling one of the few people who seemed to trust him to get out of his house, out of his life, so that he could throw himself back at the feet of a liar.

“Says who?” Matthew said after the pause.

“I’m saying it. Saying it because it’s not...we’re not...*fuck*,” Will shook his head, “Look, I can’t have you here.”

“Oh, yeah, I can see that,” Matthew said sarcastically.

“Yeah, well I never pretended I was good at subtlety, did I.”

“This about Lecter?”

“That isn’t the only reason...”

“That’s a yes then,” Matthew interrupted, shaking his head. Another pause, this one more loaded than Will was willing to deal with, “if you want me to go, just say it.”

“I need you to go.”

“That’s not good enough. You either want me or you don’t. Just fuckin’ say it.”

“Why are you making this so difficult?” Will snapped.

“Because I like you,” Matthew said, almost shouting; enough to make the dogs around him look up, worried by the noise. He stood up, walking to Will’s side. He looked serious enough that Will was tempted to tell him to be quiet, not to say whatever he was intending. It came too late, “you want

the truth? Sometimes I think you might be the only real thing I got in my life. There, is that enough?"

Will had no idea what to say. He stared straight ahead and thought he could feel the lips at his ear grinning. *Want him? You could have him. So easy and willing. Don't you want to know what it's like to use someone?* Will untangled his arms and rubbed at his face. So simple, so easy. Such a fine specimen of need and want. *Is this who you are?* Will felt bizarrely calm at the thought that it might be.

"But I'm not," he said, defeated, "I'm not real. God, I'm not sure I'm even me anymore. Don't you understand? I don't think I'd know me if I walked up and introduced myself. You can't cling to something that never existed."

"Crap. What a load," Matthew scoffed, making Will stare, "you tell yourself that every day? Cause I know who you are. You're Mister Graham, the man I was lucky enough to meet while he was mad enough to say yes to a drink. You like strays and rock music and waking early. And fishing. You see the best in people, but also the worst and the worst sticks faster than the rest. You wish your dad had been there more, hadn't drunk as much, but he wasn't and you're worried you'll go the same way. And you hate that you get attached because you think they'll always leave, because you're so fuckin' afraid of being on your own."

It was impossible to be sure if he was stunned or furious. Will kept his eyes where they had been, on Matthew's adam's apple. It bobbed as the man swallowed, obviously unnerved by his silence. Will forced his eyes up, as difficult as dragging his feet through a snowdrift.

"And right now," Matthew said, "you look like you're going to run a damn mile."

"I'm not..." Will cleared his throat, knowing he sounded as hollow as he looked, "used to having people tell me exactly what they see."

"I thought that maybe I should return the favour. You told me who I was, after all. One thing I can promise?" Matthew was smiling now, small and soft even as his eyes remained sharp, "You can count on me not to lie to you."

"I don't expect that of anyone."

"That's some suspicious mind you got there."

"I'd say it's warranted," Will couldn't stop Matthew as he leaned in and slid his arms around Will's back, pressing them close; it sent a shiver of warmth through his body, "everyone lies, one way or another. Some big, some small. It's just semantics in the end."

"Then how about you trust me? You *can* trust me, you know."

"Last time someone made a promise like that, I ended up caught."

"Yeah but, unlike that fuckin' jerk, I'll keep it."

"I just...it's not supposed to be this easy," Will said. His head felt heavy with the pressure building behind his eyes; against his better judgement he leaned it on Matthew's shoulder while the other man kissed at his exposed neck. *Normal*, it sang at him, *and not alone*. Will shivered and wished the words didn't haunt him. In that moment of sheer indulgence, he recognised it for what it was;

weakness. He grabbed at something familiar, simple, and let everything fall out, “Everywhere has its choke point. Even...even work. Jack doesn’t trust me to do my job anymore, treating me like a god damned child.”

“He doesn’t like that you’re better ‘an him, that’s all.”

“Christ, don’t let him hear you say that,” Will laughed bitterly, “Life’s difficult enough. All greys and black and...all I wanted to do was keep following my instincts, keep this copycat in my sights, and he kicks me back to the Ripper like I’m-I’m...a disobedient dog.”

“You’re workin’ that copycat case?” Matthew asked casually.

“Mmm,” Will hummed, “I mean what am I going to find at the Ripper’s dumpsite? Another cold case in the making. The copycat’s a safer bet. Amateurs always leave something behind, especially the sloppy ones,” the arms around him tightened and Will relaxed into the embrace, even as Matthew stayed quiet, “I mean even Hannibal thought it was funny when I told him...ok, I can’t tell you but just take my word for it. This guy? I’m sure the Ripper thought that Gideon was at least a suitable tribute to his talents, but our copycat’s just a joke and-*ah, ok*, I do need to breathe you know..!”

Will lifted his head and managed to force his hands up between their chests, prising himself out of the vice-like grip Matthew now had of him. When Matthew suddenly and inexplicably let go Will stumbled backwards, catching himself against the sofa before he fell. He had started to smile, try and diffuse the odd tension in the air, when he saw Matthew’s face; blank and predatory.

“You...you know I shoulda...” Matthew put his left hand on his hip, scratching at his jaw with his right, eyes fixed on the far wall, “this is a joke right? A fuckin’ joke. *Shit!*”

“What are..?”

“You...” Matthew stopped like a case snapping shut, his eyes shifting left to pin him, “you bring up your damn job and tell me what a great time you both had, having such a laugh together. Can’t you just see, I mean look who I’m *talkin’* to here! Christ sometimes you’re so blind. No one can live up to the shadow you got hanging around behind you, huh,” Will shivered, momentarily desperate to reach behind him and feel for the stag he knew was there, knew was there because he could feel it whispering, *just a child, a stupid child, let him go*.

“And you knew that when you met me,” Will replied coldly, feeling whiplashed by the change, “if it’s such a disappointment I don’t know what to tell you, other than no fucking shit.”

“Oh,” Matthew said facetiously, lifting his hands palm outwards, “*oh!* That’s great, that’s just *great*. You are fuckin’ *unreal!* Wouldn’t know somethin’ good if it walked up and fucked you in the ass, which oh wait, I guess I *did,* didn’t I.”

“Get out,” Will barely recognised his voice.

“You’re telling me to get out?” Matthew spat in barely restrained fury, pointing at his own chest, eyes backlit by violence, “Don’t flatter yourself,” he ground out as he walked from the room, tight and back straight, slamming his open palm into the doorframe as he went with a resounding smack that made Winston bark.

Will heard the door bang. He stood in the glow of the television and wondered, in a moment where he surely should, why he didn't care. You should, shouldn't you? he asked himself seriously as he heard the sound of the motorbike revving. When there was no reply Will walked around the couch and sat down in the empty space Matthew had left. The dogs, tails wagging warily now that the threat was gone, closed in and took their spots.

Something was wrong but he felt blind to it. Lehrwood's terrified eyes stared back at him from the memory of his paper photograph, even though Will knew he'd never seen them in real life. No head, never a head. He closed his eyes. The Ripper sat behind him, hands on his shoulders. *Some vile tribute,* he said, *that he'd be so upset when it was rejected*. He wondered if normal people did what he was doing now, ignoring the blazing row with their significant other so that they could think about their job...

He frowned then, sitting up. The television was turned off, leaving the room in the dim glow of the far lamp as a single thought crept into his brain as one thing clashed with another.

There were medic uniforms at Baltimore State Asylum. Will sat stock still, remote still in his right hand. *Where the hell are you going with this*? There were medic uniforms there, and security guards too. *Violent, young, repressed*. Will felt itchy, laughing to himself a little wildly as his mind ran off without him. No, he thought, *no*. That's just as mad as...

...as seeing Hannibal's face in the Ripper's.

He clenched his left hand into a fist, feeling his nails dig in. The pain blinded the sentimentality, enough to force him into objectivity if even for a moment.

Matthew fit as well as any other young man with morbid curiosity would fit, but it didn't make it any more or less likely. Except that...*he looks enough like you to be noticeable*. Beverly's comment bit at him more than he would admit, even more so when coupled with Brian's swift observation. Gregory Fisher looked like him, and it wasn't as if Matthew *hadn't* shown a proclivity for easy violence. *And not just on the street,* the lips laughed. Will felt the phantom feeling of fingers at his throat, closing tightly, gasping for breath, Matthew's smile clouded by pleasure. He shut his eyes and asked himself:

"What the hell am I doing?"

He remembered the day he'd placed the template of the Ripper over Hannibal's shape and tried to weigh up the consequences. Will sat in the dim room and stared at his hands. What are you letting slip? He asked himself, And why? Since when did you become blind on a whim? Just look, and if you look then you can discount all of this madness and see that there is no proof behind any of it. And if it turns out there is then...

He thought of Sutcliffe, decomposing in the earth with the stigma of multiple homicides weighing him down further than the simple six feet. *If it had been Hannibal*, the lips whispered conspiratorially, *you would be a wreck right now*. Will bit at the inside of his lip, his breath hitching in his throat at the thought. I don't hate myself that much, he thought by way of reply. One man's truth is another man's lies. Will knew Hannibal was hiding from him, even as he appeared happy to unfold himself piece by piece before Will's eyes like some sort of demented puzzle box. A life within a life within a life. Will closed his eyes when felt the hysteria threatening to overflow.

"You god damn *liar*," he choked out, unsure who he was even accusing anymore, bringing his hands up to cover his eyes, "what do you want from me? Christ, I..."

If someone had asked him why he was crying, he probably wouldn't have had an answer to give them other than it felt wonderful and awful all at once. He wiped at the tears as they spilled, futilely. I want it all to go back, he thought to himself coldly, I want to go back to being the naive fool that I was. I want to be blind to everything because knowing...knowing only makes the monsters real.

Will closed his eyes and felt his chest convulse. It hurt, bizarrely. He'd always wondered, how could the pain be real when it was nothing more than a thought? He curled up on the couch, head resting against soft fur that moved up and down beneath his cheek with every breath.

Soon he was asleep, amidst a familiarity he knew he needed above all else.

Tapping. There was tapping at the door. Will jerked awake, cold and stiff and in the cool glow of the dawn. He felt groggy, half awake, but stood up despite his heavy, stiff limbs and shambled to the door. Everything felt fuzzy and trimmed neatly at the edges, as if there were parts missing.

When he reached out for the handle Will was snapped awake by the realisation that there was no sound at the door. His eyes flitted up, fixed on the window, wide with something he wanted to call fear but if he looked closer was truly...

Milky eyes and a dead grin stared back at him, as Garrett Jacob Hobbs tapped against the glass. Condensation blossomed from his breath, mussing the clear picture of his face, spattered with blood. Two words mouthed by corpse blue lips; *you see*. Then he was gone, rushing past and leaving a shadow in his wake.

Will hesitated only a few seconds, cold air drawn deeply down, before he had grabbed his shotgun and rushed out into the dim light, barely thinking clearly enough to slip his feet into unlaced boots.

The dawn was sickly yellow. Pale and wan and barely enough to let him see the fleeing figure. The freezing air cut at his bare forearms, his face, filled his lungs with frozen puffs that emerged milky white. *Milky eyed*. Will thought he could hear a whooping laugh on the air, rising above the inert, frozen stillness. His heart beat triple time as he ran, never gaining ground, never losing it. The quiet was absolute and still, as if the very world was as solid as the earth beneath his feet.

They ran to the creek. Somehow Will thought he should have known it. Should have expected it. This was where he'd seen it, the raven stag. Where it had let him drown. Maybe this was some sort of fate, his sleep addled mind told him. Yes, a reckoning.

The trees were skeletal, grasping fingers at the clouds above. Barely lit, Will slowed as he reached the thicket by the creek. No gurgling water, not a sound. Everything was clean and undisturbed and without corruption. His heartbeat ticked like a metronome, faster and faster as the beat lit up. He could feel it behind him, hand on his shoulder.

There, it said, fervent, *there he is. You see him. You see.*

Crunching of snow. The snort, a sound of derision. Will bared his teeth, crouching low behind a large rock in front of him, thick with lichen. It was cold, ice-like, as he rested his wrist against its flat surface. The gun was steady as Will felt the snow against his knees, sharp with chill on the reddening flesh.

He knows you.

Heartbeat slowing. Will watched with a steady hand. The lips at his ear leaned closer, closer. *You'd let him have you forever, would you? Nothing but a ghost.*

Short, shallow breaths. Time seemed to slow as Hobbs appeared, creeping slowly, eyes scanning the calm ground as he reached down and...

The shot cracked like thunder in the quiet. A startle of crows flapped into the air from the nearby skeleton-trees, cawing harshly. Will stood on shaky legs, feeling the hand slipping from his shoulder, and stumbled across the rough ground, through the half dead bramble, scratching at his flesh, tearing open small strips of blood. He grit his teeth, straining closer, eyes wide to try and see the body in the gloom, prove to himself that he was free of it.

The air was perfumed with blood. Will stared down at the water's edge, frozen thick and brittle, slick with dark red as it poured from the gaping wound in the white hart's neck. It's great, black eye seemed to stare up at him accusingly while the heat left its body in a shimmering of steam from its smooth, white hide. Will could suddenly feel himself shaking, looking down at the deer as his lips moved, over and over and over.

"No," he said, face crumpling, "*no, no*..."

As he turned and ran, tripping and falling and scrambling back to his feet, he thought he could hear Hobbs' laughter high on the wind, following him home. The air became thin, too little to breathe. The skyline seemed to tip precariously back and forth, as if viewed from a boat in a storm. Will thought he couldn't see the sky, as his vision blurred and he spun in a slow circle, legs giving way.

The gun dropped from his hands as he crumpled to the ground, his white world turning grey and black as his eyes slid closed.

"William Graham?"

It would have been hard to believe it was barely forty minutes since he'd arrived in the ER, vaguely dressed and scatter-eyed, but time was a shaky concept. Was it less or more? Will felt his neck twitch as he looked up to find a woman in blue scrubs standing at the head of the waiting room. She called again, making his eyes blink; *that is you, isn't it? That's your name.* So unfamiliar to hear someone call him William. The last had been Hannibal, and before that his father.

"Yes," he said so quietly that he knew it was lost beneath the coughs and running wheels over linoleum and humming machinery. Somehow he managed to stand, getting the nurse's attention. She smiled at him and asked him to follow her. He walked behind her slowly, right arm curled across his waist as if to stop everything from spilling out.

Unfortunately as soon as he sat down on the gurney, the shaking started again and he couldn't listen to the questions she was asking. They irritated him, nipped at the thin calm.

"It says here you passed out. Have you been vomiting? Is your vision blurred or intermittent?"

Thankfully she stopped when he held up his hand.

“I need...” he opened his eyes, squinting against the light, “an MRI scan.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, trying her best not to look tired and exasperated, “but I really need you to go through this with me before we go that far.”

“Look,” he said, trying to stay calm even as his hands shivered; he stuffed them under his armpits and shook his head, “my notes. Can’t you get my notes? My-my medical records?”

“Yes, we can, but it’ll take a bit of time, we’re...”

“Everything’s in there, you have to *give me the scan*.”

“Please, Mr. Graham, if you could just tell me what’s wrong we can try and treat you as best we can.”

“I think I have reoccurring viral encephalitis,” he ground out, staring at her waist with cold determination, “and if you don’t get a doctor here in the next two minutes I won’t be responsible for your damn job when he finds me in your care having a seizure on the fucking floor.”

Things sped up, like running the film at one and a half speed. Not too fast that he couldn’t understand what was happening, but just enough that he couldn’t catch full words if he didn’t pay attention. The doctor was middle aged and thick set, heavy around the face but droopy, giving him the look of a bloodhound. He ordered the scan without much trouble. Will assumed he’d read his file.

Staying still in the MRI machine was difficult. The clicks seemed to boom and the light was calming and yet irritating. He was tired, so *tired*, but his body was awake, sending electrical impulses skittering up and down his spine at random, twitching his fingers and his neck. He closed his eyes and tried to breathe normally. Nothing but short, quick breaths were possible. He closed his mouth and breathed through his nose. *Boom, click, hum hum hum*. Will thought he could feel the vibration running from his coccyx to his shoulder blades.

It stayed with him even after he was back on his feet and in his own clothes. Will stood in the room, right arm permanently wrapped across his waist, left thumbnail trapped in his teeth. Quick, shallow breaths one and again and again and again. He felt light headed when the doctor entered. From the look on his face Will knew something was wrong.

“Would you like to sit down?” the doctor asked.

Will shook his head, blinking.

“Well then, I think first of all I need to know a few things. You are clearly distressed. Can you tell me exactly what it is that brought you here?”

“You don’t believe me,” Will said quietly, murmuring around his thumb, “do you. You don’t think it’s real either.”

“Mr. Graham, we just want to help.”

“I saw it, but it wasn’t there,” he said quickly, hearing the pain in his voice, “*he* wasn’t there and I-I passed out and...please, just tell me what you found.”

“It is possible that the prior infection has caused more damage than previously expected,” he said, making Will frown, “are you saying you’ve experienced visual hallucinations?”

“Prior infection?” he repeated, fast breaths sticking in his throat, “I-I’m not mad, I’m s-*sick*.”

“Unfortunately we did not find any evidence in the MRI that the infection has returned, which should be good news, but...”

“Liar,” Will bit out, looking up to catch the doctor’s eye; the man looked mildly surprised at the outburst.

“I’m sorry if this is not what you expected, but I can guarantee you...”

“You’re a fucking liar!” Will shouted aggressively, arms curling protectively across his chest as it heaved again and again, “You want to use me to? *Huh*? You want to experiment on me..!”

“-that is not true, if you’d just-“

“..shut up, just *shut up!* You won’t get away with it!”

“-Mr. Graham please, calm down-“

And then he was there. Will stared at Sutcliffe, smiling up at him with his confident arrogance. *Not real, it can’t be real.* He sucked in a long breath that made his chest ache, staggering back wide eyed, hearing a crash behind him and the sound of metal cascading against the floor. There were lots of voices, too many all at once, and he was shouting, shouting at the hands that held him, *don’t touch me, don’t fucking touch me!*

“You’re breathing too shallow,” a female voice said as he was held still, wrestling against them, “it’s making you dizzy and making you panic. Long, deep breaths, can you do that for me?”

“You can’t,” he sobbed, “you *can’t*.”

“Can you hear me Mr. Graham?”

“S-stop*,* puh-puh-please...” his throat closed up; *please god someone.*

“I need a sedative, he’s hyperventilating.”

“No, *no*.”

“Hold his arm.”

“NO!”

He awoke in the dark. Quiet. His eyelids felt heavy, difficult to move. And think. Difficult to think straight.

It was an effort to push up, rolling ungainly over onto his left side. A dim light over the doorway caught his eye. He followed it down, until he found a plastic note holder, stuffed with a heavy file.

Will stared at it, blinking when his eyes began to itch.

He thought he might have fallen asleep again. When he opened his eyes there was someone there, blocking the light. And voices, two of them. He looked up through errant curls. Hannibal was not looking at him, instead reading through a thick manila wallet open in his hands, heavy with jumbled papers of all colours. He looked imposing and Will felt the need to laugh. *How*, he wanted to ask, *how how how?*

“And you thought giving him a sedative the correct course of action?” Hannibal was asking, tone leaving no room to argue with the fact that the person he was talking to was utterly wrong.

“He was clearly distressed, and we were concerned he might do harm to himself or my staff,” the doctor, he was sure it was the bloodhound-doctor. He sounded angry. Will did not move. His tongue felt thick and his mouth dry. He tried to lick his lips but it felt oddly detached.

“It says here that you gave him benzadiazopine.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“And yet you told me he was hyperventilating.”

“He was, so I...”

“So you chose benzadiazopine? A respiratory depressant? Any first year medical student would know that. You do realise you could have caused irreparable lung damage, at worst respiratory failure?”

“That’s not...” the doctor tried to argue.

“He will need a muscle relaxant,” Hannibal cut him off; Will closed his eyes, “Something to ease any spasms or locked musculature.”

“I can write up some Carisoprodol.”

A loaded pause. Will heard the manila folder flap shut and the rustle of fabric.

“I would prefer if you could perhaps find me a competent doctor,” Hannibal said coolly, “one who would know how addictive Carisoprodol is when combined with a sedative. As I fear that may be asking too much, I would instead ask that you give me twenty, ten milligram capsules of Cyclobenzaprine and hope that I do not take this entire affair to your acting consultant,” a long pause, in which Will was sure he could accurately imagine cold eyes daring to be opposed. Eventually a door opened and closed, “Will? You are awake?”

Will nodded sleepily, feeling Hannibal’s hand at his shoulder.

“How did you know where I was?” he asked quietly as Hannibal helped him to sit up, holding him steady.

“It seems you have not changed your emergency contact details,” Lecter said, brushing the curls from his forehead, “it was lucky I was awake when they called.”

“My chest hurts,” he said quietly, leaning heavily against Lecter’s side.

“I know. Come, I will take you home.”

By the time the pills were delivered and signed off and Hannibal acquired a wheelchair to take him to the exit, the daylight was strong outside. Hannibal helped him to the car and Will let him fasten the seat-belt. By the time the Bentley was running he was asleep again. He vaguely remembered the car stopping, being helped up, but the journey was a loss.

“Can you walk?”

“I think so.”

It turned out that thinking wasn’t quite good enough. Hannibal held him by the waist, keeping him upright, until they were once more inside and Will could hear the familiar clicking of claws and the smell of slightly stale air. He was settled onto the sofa, feeling an itching need to get free of it as soon as he was placed upon it. It was too close to a dream, imagining waking up on the sofa as if nothing had happened at all. Yet he could feel the cuts on his legs, feel the scrape on his wrist as the shotgun had kicked back.

He felt the need to choke out some sort of question, only he had no idea what it was supposed to be. He heard the sound of the tap running in the kitchen and curled up against the arm of the couch, pushing his face against the material. Trying to take a long, deep breath turned out to be a mistake. He ended up coughing roughly, unable to stop, pain lancing through his ribcage.

“Here,” Hannibal once more helped him up, rubbing slow circles on his back until he felt the fit subside; then he was handed a glass of water and small, tope coloured tablet, “this will help.”

Will swallowed it, careful not to set off his gag reflex. His throat felt tight and his chest even more so. When he paid attention to the world around him once more, he found Hannibal sitting next to him, hands clasped between his knees, eyes intent.

“How do you feel?”

“Awful,” Will said, because he felt it covered all bases. He put the glass down and wiped his chin, feeling a drip of water there.

“The muscle relaxant should help alleviate the pain of the contraction, but you must take it every six hours,” Will looked up when Hannibal paused, finding him staring at something he hadn’t even noticed the night before; Matthew’s jumper slumped over the back of his desk chair, obviously forgotten when the man had stormed out the night before.

“I am sorry, I assumed you were alone.”

“I am.”

“I see.”

“No, I don’t think you do. But it doesn’t matter.”

“Then I will not pry further,” a pause, in which Will desperately wished he would ask, “Will?”

“I saw it.”

Hannibal did not speak. It made Will feel obliged to fill in the blanks. He felt drowsy, unable to think why he should be worried by his situation even as something, a small niggling fear, danced at the back of his mind. When Hannibal's arm slid across his shoulders Will happily slumped back into the man's embrace, pushing his face against his neck. Hastily applied cologne and warm skin. Will breathed deeply, until he felt his chest contract, and closed his eyes.

"I saw Hobbs," he said, feeling less messy than he had when he'd tried to explain it to the doctor, "He was there, only he wasn't and I couldn't tell the difference."

"Perhaps a dream?"

"Maybe," Will agreed, "or maybe I'm just sick. Always have been sick. Maybe that's what this is. Just me being sick since the day I was born."

"I would say stressed," Hannibal spoke in an authoritative tone that dared Will not to believe it, "overworked and exhausted. Not ill."

"Not my body," he said, feeling his limbs sagging as he yawned, "my mind. Looks like it's just my mind. It's too much to hope for more than that."

"I say it's always wise to hope for more. And where you are concerned I apply it as a rule."

"No, you don't get to say that anymore."

"Don't I?"

Will pressed his face closer into the hollow by his collarbone, right hand shifting against Hannibal's chest clumsily. He felt like laughing again, wondering dimly if it was some odd side effect of the sedative.

"I remember when I could let you. Was it foolish then?"

"I hope not."

"You were there, weren't you?" he asked before he could think about why it would be a bad idea.

"Where exactly do you mean?"

"The day I left. Was taken. Whichever. I saw you. I remember. I'm sure I remember you in the doorway. You looked at me like I was something fascinating, to be studied. I remember."

No reply. Will yawned again, moving his face against Hannibal's shirt. The material was soft, smooth, and the hard muscle beneath made him feel absurdly safe. This time he couldn't hold back the laugh, even if it emerged only as a weak and pathetic sound. Eventually he cracked open his eyes, frowning.

"Wait. What day is it?"

"Day?" this time Hannibal spoke without recourse, making Will wonder if he had even admitted his previous statement at all or if it was just in his head, "It is Friday."

"Oh," Will closed his eyes again, "then happy birthday."

Will felt the soft, rumbling chuckle against his face as if it were a gift he hadn't been expecting. Then there was a hand in his hair, pushing through soft curls to touch fingertips to his scalp.

"Your incongruity is an endless attraction, Will," Hannibal's voice was deep and soft when heard through chest and shirt. Will stayed where he was as long as he was allowed to, both by Lecter and himself.

When Hannibal eventually left, forced to by a looming appointment with a client rather than any seeming want to leave, Will felt jittery.

As the sedative finally wore off the world faded back into place, he stared at the ceiling. Without the will to fight it, the associations ran rampant as his mind began to beat, hooves and milky air-puffed screams. *The light flashed, his eyes rolled back, the world came into play.* Hannibal's arm around his shoulders. *(a click at his ear, like the snapping of fingers.)* He scrubbed at his face. *No*. Said it because it wanted to believe it, not because he did. *What did you do to me?* Oh god.

His mouth felt thick and unusable. *'Who-who ar'you? Say something?'* He heard his own voice, sick with fear. He sat up quickly, feeling a tightening sickness in his gut. Oh god, oh god.

Who are you?

Will opened his eyes and looked up at the stag-man, crouched atop the corner of his dresser. His white eyes narrowed and his mouth opened in a snarl. Will closed his eyes again as if to hide from the sight, and pushed his face into his hands. *No proof, no proof*. He's my friend. *He lies to you.* Everyone lies.

The Chesapeake Ripper. The words danced behind his eyelids and Will felt the sickness rise. Never had he put them together, not knowingly allowed himself to believe it. Hannibal Lecter. He opened his eyes and thought he could hear creaking floorboards behind him. He knew he was shaking again, though not as vividly as before.

Why, he thought brokenly. Why would he? How?

No proof. Will clasped his hands together and swallowed. Something that would need to be rectified were he to stop this madness before it went any further.

Everything felt close and yet also far away. Enough that he thought taking the muscle relaxant again at three was probably a mistake. It made the world seem thick, like moving through water. He drank a cup of black coffee, even though he was sure chucking caffeine into the mix was probably a mistake.

Then he called Freddie Lounds.

"A bit late for you to wake up," she drawled, "late night or something?"

"That's not important," he said, voice monotone, "listen, are you free tonight between seven and twelve?"

"Uh, yeah. Why?"

"Because I have something stupidly dangerous for us to do," Will said as he fished out his invitation to Lecter's party, "and I'd rather make it as easy for you as possible."

He left the extra ticket in the drawer, snapped shut.

“They’ve taken out all the chairs,” said a voice from behind him.

Will turned, watching as a pale, bejewelled hand gestured to the surrounding tables, decked in cream, red and gold. A long, slow, single note hummed out into the subtle chatter, the voice of many instruments all at once.

“For which I am very glad, I do so hate red velvet,” the voice became apparent in an older woman he vaguely recognised, hair in a black bob, eyes blue and clear, “Something archaically tacky about it, don’t you think?”

Thinking that it was a mistake to come was too late a thought now that he was inside. The Lyric Opera House had seemed fairly modern from its frontage, though the inside was entirely classic and traditional in style. A high balcony surrounded them from above, bedecked with seats, making him feel as if he were about to perform surgery for an audience in eighteen seventy six. The orchestra pit was stuffed with the eponymous orchestra, currently tuning up with long, slow notes to the oboe at its head. He looked up from the wide, slightly sloped area before the stage in which they stood and frowned on finding uniform, bright fluorescent light strips on the ceiling, equally spaced; they seemed like misfits at the party, in this cavernous space, filled with the echo of voices.

His chest still hurt, when he breathed too deeply. The back of his neck felt cool with the chill air of the vaulted room. He reached up and, not for the first time since he'd done it earlier, ran his hand over his short hair, then down to his clean shaven face. *Respectable,* it said, *like you pretend to be*. He wasn't sure who he was trying to kid anymore. For the first time since setting foot in the building, Will wished he had brought someone to fill that plus one ticket.

“I wouldn’t know,” he said with a flat smile, taking a quick drink from the champagne flute in his hand. He’d picked it up as he entered mainly as a neat and easy cover.

“The curse of the male mind,” the woman said airily, yet her eyes were keen, “but you look a little lost dear.”

“I...” Will blinked rapidly, swallowing, and refused to succumb to the bleating alarm in his brain ordering him to leave, “was just wondering if you knew where the man of the hour was?”

“Our darling Dr. Lecter?” the woman smiled broadly, showing overly white teeth, and slipped her arm through his; Will hoped she didn’t feel him tense like a garrotte wire pulled taught when she did so, “Come, let’s see if we can find him together. Hunting is always so much more fun in pairs.”

She led him through the growing crowds, wending their way between tables bedecked in crimson lilies tied with gold ribbon, past women draped in black satin, men in suits that looked as if they cost more than three month’s wages. A plume of perfumes and subtle chatter, some of which he caught, most of which he allowed to wash over him. Sometimes the woman on his arm, increasingly feeling like a vice, stopped to speak to the social butterflies around them, flitting their wings. Will stood by her side, statuesque, and drank slowly while his eyes scanned the crowd.

“Oh this? This is Will Graham, one of Hannibal’s friends. You must have met him at the last feast, no?”

He wished he had the ability to filter out the faces and names he was introduced to as they meandered. Will knew he shook hands like a ghost. It always put people's backs up. Yet still the woman on his arm carried him forwards. Will managed to place his empty glass on a passing waiter's tray, regretting it moments later when he found himself without an easy excuse not to talk.

Choosing to come had been a decision of two halves; partly to allow Freddie unmitigated free reign of Lecter's house while he could guarantee the man was not there, and the other...

The other was far more complex, even though it was something that should have been simple; and Will hated it.

"Ah! Why of *course* he's there!"

They were drawn from the main arena by a slim sight of a vague shape through the geometric window of two partly open doorways. Will walked purposefully, even as he was not entirely sure what he planned to do once he reached his destination. Things had been swimming along since he'd sat in the barber's chair and watched the curls clipped away, the stubble shaved from his face. Since he'd unpacked *the* suit and put it on, silk lining soft against his wrists.

The sound of settling festivities became muted background noise as they slipped out through the open door and crossed a wide, thickly carpeted corridor. Will heard the sounds of plates and glasses clinking with an accompaniment of cutlery as they pushed through into what appeared to be a de facto catering suite. The woman on his arm finally detached, marching towards the man currently facing away from them as he fussed with some small detail on one of the many identical plates before him.

"Dr. Lecter," she said, causing the man to half turn and regard her; Will could see a small saucier's jug in his hand, "I do believe you are neglecting your guests."

"My apologies, Margaret," he said with his usual polite smile, placing the jug down and wiping his pristine hands on a nearby dishtowel, "a force of habit to be in the kitchen."

"The food will come out wonderfully without you," she said, steering him back towards the door while the caterers buzzed by, "and you will be mortified when you find out Will and I were forced to look *everywhere* for you, and that half the congregation have secured him for a dance later this evening. I fear there may be brawl."

Maroon eyes did not flick up, did not search frantically, did not wonder as to where he might be. Will could not suppress the shiver of a thrill as Hannibal's eyes slid to him as if they knew precisely where to find him at all times. The smile on his placid face ticked up a notch, reaching his eyes. Will couldn't stop himself returning it softly. It was easy to lie to himself; *it's all necessary*. Hannibal approached him with courtly steps, Margaret still at his side though seeming somewhat forgotten.

He felt himself observed for a few seconds too long, enough that he knew what the eyes said even before the man spoke; *an unexpected pleasure*.

"I hope your guest is not languishing without your presence. I know how it is to be lost in an unknown crowd."

"I didn't bring anyone," Will said reflexively breaking eye contact, "so I suppose you can consider me the one who's lost."

“Not at all,” the smile had infected Hannibal’s voice now, as he offered his other arm; Will hesitated, looking back up into his sincere gaze, “not now that I’ve found you.”

Sliding his arm into Hannibal’s felt like a foolish move. It didn’t stop him, but Will felt better for acknowledging it for what it was. They returned to the buzz just as the orchestra began their first piece of the night; Čiurlionis. The music moved through him much as it had the first night he had heard it, while he and Hannibal had worked together in the kitchen with seeming harmony.

Memories of times before. He would have called them better times, but knowing them for what they were only made the label seem bitter. Will felt momentarily as prey being led back to the den, to feel safe and warm and entirely at ease before the bullet struck. An accessible feeling, as close as the memories that held it; *quivering, cold, vulnerable in the chair, watched and watched by dispassionate eyes.*

Will held onto the memory tightly, arm in arm, and stepped through the door.

Freddie hated opening the door, hearing the echoing sound of the vague but low creak it gave, not because it was breaking and entering but because she knew Will Graham had done the same at her flat and probably felt a similar spike of adrenaline too. Or maybe not. She wasn’t so conceited as to compare her one bedroom apartment to Hannibal Lecter’s urban palace.

Also she’d been given the key. Kind of took the fun out of it.

It was cold and dark but she didn’t want to turn on any lights. Not in this neighbourhood. Too many old busybodies in an area like this, with nothing better to do than stare out of their triple glazed windows at other people’s lives. So she put on the Maglite and trained the beam to narrow. It was a reassuring weight in her hand and, push come to shove, could double as a weapon. She’d rather not electrocute anyone else if she didn’t need to.

“Why am I doing this?” she muttered to herself as she dismissed the large room on her right, some sort of lounge, and the other just after it, a downstairs bathroom.

She knew why, it was just easier to blame this on Graham. He was an easy man to dislike, and Freddie wasn’t up to fighting the instinct. She was never sure why other people were willing to overlook the man’s obvious malice, enough to trust him with life and death. He was a viper, that much she knew. Coiled and dormant, until the wrong person poked too hard. She was still that person, was resigned to the fact, but it didn’t mean she couldn’t take advantage of him while she stalked out a story.

In fact the only reason she’d taken him up on his offer had been because she knew he was a madman, but a madman inflicted with the curse of being utterly right about people. He’d been right about her after all. She took a deep breath and smiled flatly at the memory, ignoring the need to smash something. Probably the expensive looking vase, blue trees on a white background, sitting on a cabinet in the hall. It helped that Lecter was also an easy man to dislike, she thought as she walked into the kitchen, only for different reasons.

Didn’t help that Graham hadn’t given her much to go on. Just a hunch, although obviously enough of a hunch to push this far. She was well aware that he and Lecter had been pretty close before the whole kidnapping affair, so if he was willing to put him in the firing line now then it must have

been one hell of a fall out. Or he had his reasons to. One or the other. In the end it wouldn't make any difference what the motive had been. Just what the consequences were.

Her consequence would be a big enough royalty cheque to live off for the rest of her life, if Graham came through.

"Ok," she said to no-one, "if I were a shrink with something to hide, where would I hide it?"

The night became lightheaded and soft around the jagged edges. Will drank four flutes of champagne in an hour, counting only because it made him feel better to do so. Not because it helped. The only thing it did help was his aching chest which, without the muscle relaxant, had slipped back to a constant ache. Will had subconsciously decided being drunk would substitute.

Hannibal remained unobtrusively attentive. When the conversation of the group became too focused on Will, or Will himself became uncomfortable, Hannibal quickly steered it elsewhere, or simply placed his hand on Will's shoulder and smiled, giving their apologies and moving them on through the crowd until they were inevitably stopped once more.

Because the world had become something stable for him now? Will wondered as he watched Hannibal from the corner of his eye. An easy point of view to see from a man whose own world was currently in flux. *Or slipping dangerously backwards*. Hannibal appeared to be in his element, brushing hands near to other hands but never touching, and causing laughs and smiles decorous enough to leave a lasting impression. Will knew himself how the impression would grow, amiability to fondness to friendship. To more if it was allowed. *If it was left unchecked.* He found he had another glass in his hand and took a small drink.

When Hannibal was called away by a whisper from one of the waiting staff, Will thought it only obvious that he should follow. He hoped he was being as subtle as he felt he was, though the mix of medication, alcohol and pain was enough to make him feel anything by this point. He lost sight of Hannibal as he headed back through into the corridor. Will walked quickly down the carpeted hall, eyes swinging left and right at the junctions. Then a voice said,

"I don't mean to stay," a woman's voice, soft and husky and somewhat stilted.

"Wise," Hannibal's voice replied, "yet regrettable."

Will stopped, hand against the wall, and backed up until he found the propped open doors leading to the front entrance. Sheer curiosity had him slip his head around the corner, to find Hannibal standing with his back to him beside a woman, shorter, with a wave of elegant blonde hair above a thick white jacket. She stood by Hannibal's side, staring back towards the entrance, her face obscured. Will pulled himself back out of sight but remained, listening.

"I've had an offer. California. Everything would be taken care of, and I'm tempted," the woman said.

"Oh? I understood that you were not going to take it."

"You did."

“A little bird told me.”

A silence. When Will peered again the woman had her head turned to the left, staring up at Hannibal and...and he could not look away from the silent but almost resolute fear in her blue eyes, the set to her lips because *you know it don’t you*, the grinning lips finished for him, *you know it because you wear it for him too*. Then her eyes shifted briefly and Will pulled himself back before she saw him.

“And,” Hannibal continued, “I am sure it was not California, was it. Would you truly tell me, I wonder, if you were to go?”

“Well, you know how fickle these offers are.”

“Then you are staying. I am glad. It would have been a shame to have to track you down.”

“I can’t stay,” she said again, as more to herself than Hannibal; another silence, in which Will heard his own words, *I can’t stay*, echoed back at him. Who was she? Who was this woman? “I hope you enjoy the night. Margaret was desperate that I come and wish you well, although I’m not sure how she got my number.”

“Guilty as charged,” Will could hear the unrepentant smile in Hannibal’s voice, “sometimes I think you’re a fool to trust me.”

“Yes. Maybe you’re right.”

“Are you sure you do not want to come inside? Will would be thrilled to meet you.”

It had been a politely terse conversation, with little inflection by which to read either player. Will had found himself tempted by recklessness and inebriety to peek again, until the next seven words to slip from the woman’s mouth were spoken. Tainted by an underlying desperation and retribution he could not place, their incongruity should have worried him more than their content. Yet the content was impossible to ignore.

“Whatever you’re doing with Will Graham,” she said, “*stop*.”

Will became acutely aware of his own breathing. *Whatever you’re doing with...*

“Will needs my help.”

“You’ve crossed professional lines.”

“Or perhaps erased them would be more accurate. He is my friend.”

*Whatever you’re doing with...*Will pushed away from the wall and felt himself waver. You knew, why so amazed by something you already knew? Hearing it from another’s lips, Will knew, made it more inescapable. *Whatever you’re doing with...*

“You cannot function as an agent of friendship as a man who is disconnected from the concept.”

“Truly? I thought having a birthday warded one from insults. It seems even I am not immune.”

“Goodbye, Hannibal.”

He felt the ground rush past as he hurried back to his station. To where he had been left. To where he would be *found*. To where *whatever you're doing with...*could continue.

"I feel au revoir is more fitting," Hannibal's voice, definitely smiling now, faded as Will rushed from the scene, "until we meet again."

By the time Hannibal finally returned to the main room, Will felt as if he were a present sitting between a past and a future which were filled with an inability to be free from suspicion. There's so much you don't know about him, Will thought, and yet you try your best to accept him even as you fight against it. He closed his eyes and rubbed at his face. When he felt a soft touch against his shoulder he turned, hoping for realistic surprise, and automatically accepted the glass he was given. The clear fluid gave no smell and yet Will felt he should be wary of it.

"Water?" he asked after a pause, "Trying to tell me something?"

"I am sure I am not the only one to notice your excessive consumption of champagne tonight."

"I'm dealing with a problem."

"And you think alcohol is the solution?"

"Some part of me always thinks alcohol is the solution," Will said, feeling foolishly candid; he put the water down on the table beside him and shook his head, feeling ill and vulnerable all at once. Suddenly it were as if he was standing alone in this vast hall, in the hunter's sights. Only he had no idea what would happen, if the trigger would be pulled or..."You're doing it again," he decided to say instead.

"I do not want to tire you unnecessarily. You are still unwell."

"Not unwell," Will murmured, shivering at the memory of Hobbs' face, deathly grin, *blue lips*, "just tired. And anyway, does that really make up for you coddling me?"

"I believe today, of all days, it is my privilege."

"You get one whole birthday," Will said, resisting the urge to put his hands in his pockets, "twenty four hours then the effect wears off. So enjoy it while I can't complain."

"Then would you do me the honour of a dance?"

"A...excuse me?" the sheer liberty of the question, considering their situation and everything they knew about each other, served to make Will feel like strangling the man as well as kissing him.

"I do believe there is a wonderful example directly before you, if you are confused."

"Hardly my point. Even if I wasn't exhausted, I don't dance."

"I'll read that as will not, rather than do not."

"Whatever makes you happy."

"As I understand it, that's why you are here."

Will realised he was biting at the inside of his lip again. Happened a lot where Hannibal was involved. The flesh felt dulled, muted by alcohol. He was tempted to find another drink just to see how far he could take it. *Don't push your luck*. The mere thought of why he was here had his hands itching for another.

"Forgive me. I seem to have misunderstood your reasons for shaving this afternoon."

Again Will lifted his hand to touch his smooth jaw; for a moment it felt completely removed, dissociated, as if he were standing in another's body. Reaching further up he ran his hand through his hair again, reflexively, fingers tripping off the ends too quickly, no longer able to card through wild curls.

"Actually I had someone else do it for me," Will said, feeling the desperate need to laugh as he realised how bourgeoisie he sounded. He wondered if Hannibal was contagious.

"And trim your hair it seems. A shame. A millimetre longer and I could have seen you carved in some Italian plaza somewhere, a shining example of gioventù e bellezza."

"You know, one of these days I think you might start saying what you mean."

"And then where would we be?" Hannibal smiled.

Worryingly close to something real, Will thought. Somewhere he wasn't sure he was supposed to be, but dangerously near to what he wanted. Part of him hated the other half for needing it despite everything that had happened. Everyone who'd been hurt or lied to on the way, himself included. Where Hannibal was concerned, Will had realised a long time ago that consequences always seemed to outweigh the means.

Which meant he wasn't sure if he was grateful or furious at Matthew Brown in that moment. Will stared across the dance floor at the man, standing between two oblivious women, scanning the crowd with sharp eyes. Flashing a look to his right he found Hannibal still watching the dancers. He hoped it stayed that way.

"Excuse me for a minute."

"Of course."

A quick wending walk through the bustle of people had Will walking into Matthew quicker than he'd expected, enough to let him know he'd been spotted from across the dance floor. Nothing was said. Will grabbed his arm, noting the dark grey suit beneath his fingers, and dragged him in the direction of the long, carpeted corridor. He knew he was a little too close to drunk to be discrete and hoped that speed would make up for it.

Once they were outside Will still felt edgy, as if it weren't far enough. He pulled Matthew down the corridor, listening to their feet dulled against the carpet, until he found a set of double doors. Opening them revealed what appeared to be a function room, lit only by the light from the street lamps outside. It felt cold in the darkness, as compared to the bright almost garishness of the party.

Will let go and walked carefully towards a large table at the centre, which turned out to be many smaller tables pushed together. Turn the light on, his instincts screamed at him. Instead he spoke, calm and reserved.

“So, I suppose you’re here to remind me what a terrible mess I’m making of my life?”

“Am I allowed to say I’m sorry without you biting my head off?”

Turning to find Matthew in the gloom, the man moved towards him like a spectre. Will tensed, wanting to back away but he felt the table bumping against his thighs. His drink-slowed mind couldn’t stop the kiss until it had already begun, lifting up with fumbling hands to take Matthew by the shoulders and push. Will pressed down on the urge to wipe his lips clean.

“You taste nice,” Matthew said, and Will could hear the resentment.

“Champagne,” he said without thinking. *What’s wrong with you,* the lips asked harshly, *ready to forget so soon?* “What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to say...”

“No, don’t do that. Don’t apologise for telling the truth. You told me what you thought.”

“But I wasn’t..!”

“It’s only fair,” Will interrupted again, looking to his right, out into the dark; a laugh of derision slipped free, “considering.”

He couldn’t think of anything else to fill the gap and Matthew’s surprise at his candour was obvious. Will felt him, still as a rock, watching him with dull eyes. Then he could just make out a shake of his head and Will heard him let out an incredulous laugh, cut short when he spoke.

“Oh fuckin’ shit,” Matthew said derisively, “you’re serious, aren’t you? I’d say it was unbelievable but I think I know you too well.”

“Then why did you come?”

“Because I...” Matthew let his own words trail off, hands slipping down from shoulder blades to waist where they tightened against the soft fabric of Will’s jacket, “because I am sorry, just not for what you think. Look, I just...didn’t like the idea of you falling straight back to where you were before we met.”

“Bullshit.”

“Oh so now you’re calling me on *my* bullshit. That’s rich.”

“Let go.”

“It’s true, isn’t it?” Matthew asked accusingly, even as he obeyed Will’s request, following him with his eyes as Will walked out into the room, “You just want everything to be all hunky dory, right?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Will said tightly, hating the partial truth as it was shoved in his face, “and you don’t give a shit. You made that clear.”

“Yeah I do,” Matthew said plainly, “yeah I *do*, cause you’re the only one here deluding himself,” even in the dim light it was easy to see Matthew’s disdain, throwing his arms into the air, “So what, he dumps his girlfriend and now you’re just gonna trip back into his bed, huh?”

“How did you..?” Will asked, momentarily surprised.

“Got more ears than just those on my head.”

“Nice to know we had a relationship built on trust,” Will said wryly.

“Cute, real fuckin’ cute Will. You don’t even know what he is, do you?”

“I’m not here for..!” Will almost bit his tongue snapping his mouth shut; he marched forwards, taking Matthew by the elbow, the constant worry of Freddie and the unknown woman and his own want to offer himself to Hannibal as a way to stop all this madness, *all* of it resting at the back of his mind making him terse, snappish, “You have to go.”

“Maybe I’m just here to watch the train wreck,” even in the gloom Will could see Matthew smile, and it wasn’t pretty.

“And here I thought you might give just enough of a crap not to do this. Suppose I should have learnt my lesson from the other night.”

“Temper, temper,” Matthew said nastily.

“You don’t know me like I know you,” Will spat angrily without thinking; hearing his own words parroted back at him stung, enough to have him raise his voice, “so don’t pretend you have any right to turn up here like a-a...*fuck* knows, and..!”

He was sure he wouldn’t have known the door had even opened had it not been for the stabbing blade of light which invaded the room, so softly did it move on its hinges. The lights turned on with a flickering buzz and Will squinted despite himself. Quickly the world faded back to tolerable. With his back to the door he could only take Matthew’s reaction as an indication of who had interrupted them.

“Is everything alright?” Hannibal asked, voice soft but firm.

“Fine...” Will lied, turning to look at him.

Instantaneous, vivid memory. Will sucked in a breath that he could not release. The swiftness with which the sight was overlaid by the phantoms in his mind, *the man in the doorway, resting on the balls of his feet, eyes intent*, caused him to move backwards a step. He couldn’t have known just how obvious his shock was until he felt Matthew’s hand resting on his shoulder and Will heard him ask, *are you ok?*

“I’m fine,” he lied again; without his previous conviction he knew it sounded like one.

The door was held open as if to offer escape, but Will knew it would only lead to more trouble. When Hannibal suggested, “Perhaps some air would help,” he knew it was said mainly to provoke. It was only coincidence that it worked.

“And you’d know,” Matthew drawled.

“No,” Will said stiffly, “we are not doing this here. Come on, I’ll drive you home.”

“And you even dressed for the occasion,” Hannibal smiled condescendingly, eyes alight with humour as he watched Matthew, head tipped slightly to the right, “how disappointing for you.”

“It got me past the door,” Matthew smiled, ignoring Will, “no one even blinked twice.”

“And yet you are leaving such a mess behind.”

“It’s only a mess if you don’t know what to look for.”

“If you’re both quite done?” Will asked.

There was a moment of silence, in which Hannibal and Matthew continued to regard each other tersely, and Will felt as if he was excluded from the finer points of their conversation. He could feel his breathing run off without him, short and panicked as it had been in the bright hospital room. Can’t be, Will thought reflexively, it can’t be him. I would know, I would have known. Things would be...different. I wouldn’t feel the way I do. He wished that could be the truth, that he could trust himself enough not to be a willing sacrifice.

Can it be a sacrifice if you want it badly enough? the lips asked.

He took Matthew by the arm and made to leave before the building nausea in his gut made its way to his mouth. Or he simply laughed. It was funny, somehow, wasn’t it? Some part of him thought so. They made it as far as the door, Hannibal moving aside to make room, before Will felt Matthew jerk to a stop. His voice was cool and controlled, even if Will could feel the muscles straining in his arm.

“You think this is a big joke, don’t you? Everything’s just a big joke to you! You think you’ve seen all I’m capable of and you look at me like I’m just some shit on your damn shoes. Well you’re nothing god damned special either.”

“I am not the one who threw himself into my place as soon as there was an opening,” Hannibal replied.

“I’ve got so much more potential than you’ve ever had,” Matthew sneered, making Will look to him sharply, “you think you’re impressive. Jesus, you nearly had me fooled too. I heard what you think about me. You’re just a fuckin’ phony. Yeah. And how long till he realises it too, huh? How long d’ya think you can keep him fooled?”

“That’s enough,” Will said sternly.

“It’s not enough, cause he’s just *not enough*,” Matthew laughed bitterly.

“No, but you appear to believe yourself an adequate replacement,” Hannibal said, unamused; Will saw the flat, shark-like gaze and knew it for what it was.

“Oh I’m more than just that,” Matthew was breathing heavy, tense as a deer waiting to take flight, “I could be better than you. I already am better than you cause I know my limits. You? You’re just an ambitious fuck who doesn’t know what he wants outta life.”

“Matthew...” Will tried to butt in, tensing.

“And you’re dragging him down with your sinking ship. Christ, it’s what you want, isn’t it?” Matthew laughed, “It’s what you’ve wanted ever since you met him but you can’t bring yourself to believe it. I know, *I know*, cause it’s what I wanted too.”

"*Stop*..." Will could see Hannibal's eyes narrowing; even as someone who felt he knew him better than most, Will felt a shiver of guilty elation on seeing a sudden glimpse fear in those eyes.

"That all you want is for him to love you, right? You want it more than anything you've ever wanted in your miserable *fuckin'* life."

Will wouldn't have believed himself capable of such dissociation from his actions, if he hadn't experienced it before. *The feeling of the needle in his hand as it sank through flesh; his shaking hand, held in a strong wrist*. You were ill then, he tried to rationalise. It made no difference. Maybe you've always been ill, his mind taunted. Could it be a taunt if it were true? he tried to wonder even as he grabbed Matthew by the throat and slammed him against the wall. He did not fight, not even a reflexive squirm, as Will spoke low and dangerous into his ear.

"Shut your fucking mouth," he said softly, calmly, hot breath washing against his neck, "and get the fuck out."

He barely felt Matthew leave, perhaps too focused on his own sudden, cold anger. It slipped over his fingers like a warm glove on a cold day. Satisfying, almost comforting. Will leaned against the wall on his right side, listening to his heart beat smoothly in his chest.

What is he? The lips asked him with hideous sincerity. What is he that you would do these things for him even knowing what you do? And what exactly is it that I know? He asked in return. What have I seen past the smoke and mirrors other than vague shapes and hazy memories? Not enough to condemn a man, but not enough to save him either. Just enough to let me know that it is I who should be afraid of himself.

"I'm sorry," he said, even though he knew it wouldn't do much good, "my fault. Didn't think he'd go this far."

"Not at all," Hannibal sounded perfectly composed, "You are hardly accountable for his actions."

"Am I not?" Will asked, turning to face him. Hannibal stood very still, watching him closely. Will felt recklessly aware of where he was and with who, "I knew what he might do and yet I did nothing."

A silence long enough that Will knew Hannibal understood they were no longer talking about Matthew Brown. As Hannibal pursed his lips slightly, looking down into his drink, it was possible to see so much further. *We fall and fall further, and you're there waiting at the bottom*. The lips grinned and leaned in, as if to whisper a secret that had already unfolded. Will tried to be objective but knew it was fruitless. *Whatever you're doing with Will Graham...*

"And yet here you are," Hannibal said.

"Trying to tell me consequences don't matter?"

"Aren't always predictable," Hannibal corrected him, "and that is the joy of it. The arbitrary nature of human endeavour. It is reassuring when someone does as you hoped, even though you were aware there were hundreds of outcomes possible."

"I didn't particularly *want* him to do anything."

“Are you sure?” Hannibal asked as he walked forwards, putting himself just inside his personal space, “You might not even know it, but everyone has an outcome they would find preferable. Is this what you wanted, I wonder? Perhaps neither of us will ever know now.”

He reached up and took hold of Hannibal’s hands, pulling them gently up, mindful of the glass in his right. *What might they have done?* The lips laughed, *Did they hold Caldwell steady while the saw cut through? And did he come home and hold you afterwards with those same hands? Did he?* Somehow the thought was made worse as Will dismissed it in place of another. That he was allowed to move Hannibal’s hands without resistance only made Will more anxious. Hannibal was not a man to be lead by anyone. *Arbitrary*; the word made his mind feel loose. Matthew was right, he thought, it’s all just a game. *Whatever you’re doing with Will Graham...*

“I should go,” he said, clearing his throat, “think I’ve made enough of a mess for one night.”

“And yet it is your most delightful quality,” Hannibal smiled, “the balance of order and chaos is so delicate, after all.”

“You’re taking on broken goods.”

“I have always entertained the idea of the broken coming back together, fixed anew. Perhaps this time we will be allowed to see without interruption.”

“I think I...” Will hesitated, licking his lips once as his eyes fell to Hannibal’s lapel, “see more of you than you think.”

“And yet you are still here. Should I be commending or berating you?”

“Both,” Will smiled flatly, returning his eyes to Hannibal’s, “Goodnight Hannibal.”

“Goodnight, dear Will.”

The kiss came without either seeming aware of why it was inappropriate. For a single moment, in the darkness of an unfamiliar room, wearing a suit made of bad memories, in the arms of a man he knew he should despise, his mind swimming with alcohol and distress and murder and the words of a woman whose name he did not know, Will Graham felt absurdly *normal.*

As he walked out the front entrance to the grand Opera House, Will sent Freddie Lounds a text message, short and to the point: *Time's up*.

“Actually I’m not looking to buy a ticket,” he said to the woman in the booth as he flashed his temporary badge, “I’d like to speak to the owner, Terrence Brown? I was informed he was in his office.”

It had been a long morning, wondering if he was taking things too far, or perhaps not far enough. If he had a hunch, normally he’d call it in, let Jack know, brainstorm, try and see the links through the eyes of others. Recently he had realised how easy it was to be secretive. There was so much more control to be had when he alone had the information he needed. Then, once he had it, he could decide exactly what he was going to do.

Right now, he was focusing on the one thing Jack had told him not to. He was directed to a small, two storey building not far from the jeeps Matthew had borrowed on their previous visit. Will buzzed at the intercom and introduced himself to the crackly voice. After a few moments the door clicked and he walked inside.

It smelled of old paint mixed with faint hints of hay, muck and feed. The door led straight into an open plan office, three desks placed at odd angles to each other and each messier than the last. Behind the one furthest from him, sitting in front of a large window and next to a long poster showcasing a polar bear, Will found a short, blond man in his late fifties who was currently riffling through a heavy stack of pink paper. He looked up when Will cleared his throat, showing piggy eyes behind thick rimmed glasses propped upon a long nose. His complexion was a mess of rosacea cheeks and pale skin, giving him the distinct air of a man about to keel over at any second.

"Ah, yes, you're the man," he said, standing quickly and walking out to offer a hand, showing himself a good foot smaller than Will; his hand was clammy and warm, Will shook briefly, "Charlene called ahead from the gate. I hope there's not any trouble. I mean it's not every day we get a visit from the Feds."

A quick, nervous laugh followed. Will safely assumed that it probably followed most things the man said. Will took the seat when offered, mainly because his leg felt stiff and he could use the rest. He waited until Terrence Brown retook his seat behind his desk, declining a coffee when offered.

"It's nothing to worry about, Mr. Brown," he said, trying to keep his tone blank, "I'm currently investigating a string of crimes in the local area and it has led me here."

"Not any of our employees I hope," Brown asked with a quick smile, and another laugh, "only I haven't had any complaints, if that's what you're asking about."

"Not at all," Will shook his head, "what I'm looking for would be something I'm sure only you would be aware of. Unless you have staff that've been here for oh, say twenty to twenty five years?"

"I...no," Brown looked confused, frowning, but the smile stayed causing an odd perplexity in his expression that made Will want to laugh, "that is I had Harold Farthern, great keeper. Worked mainly with the gorillas but he died last year. Tragic, really. He'd been with us for thirty years. So, uh, I guess I haven't. Everyone else is pretty new."

"Alright, then perhaps you can help me," Will said, trying for a calm tone to keep Brown at ease, "do you remember any unexpected or unexplained animal deaths here at the zoo in the last twenty or so years?"

"Unexplained?" Brown licked his lips and blinked twice, before forcing himself to relax back into his chair, "Uh, no. Not really. Unexplained, no."

"It would have been smaller animals, lemur sized maybe. Something easy to access, no heavy security doors. Something even a child could use."

"No," Brown said adamantly, seeming suddenly sure of himself, "nothing like that here. What kinda thing is it that you're investigating?"

"I'm sorry, I can't discuss an open case."

“Just a strange question to ask,” Brown said tightly, “that’s all.”

Will took a breath and scratched behind his ear. It was obvious the man was hiding something, and not very well. Will smiled and stood from his chair, making Brown lift his eyebrows in surprise.

“I see, well thank you for your time Mr. Brown. That’s all I needed to ask.”

“Oh,” Brown smiled, laughing again, “alright. Well, I’m sorry I couldn’t be more help.”

“Not at all,” Will said as Brown hurried up to escort him out.

“If I think of anything, I’ll call,” Brown said, smiling with teeth.

Looking at the man up close Will found it almost impossible to see any similarities between the man and Matthew. *Adopted,* will thought quickly, unless he’s the spitting image of his mother. The grey clouds still swamped the skies as they left the office building, creating a sombre mood.

“So, you said most of your staff are new?” he asked casually as they walked.

“Oh, uh yes,” Brown said, seeming more at ease as they left the small office.

“So why only one veteran?” Will asked, smiling, “The food that bad in the cafeteria?”

“Ha! Well, it’s nothing to rave about, but no. Just a little incident, some people got uppity about it and we had a walk out of some of our older employees.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Nothing big, just people being people I guess. No one can agree on everything.”

“And hiring in summer, that’s gotta be a nightmare, right in the busy season.”

“Well we lucked out there, it was December when it happened.”

“Everything has a silver lining I guess. So that must have been about fifteen years ago, yeah?”

“Sixteen,” Brown corrected without thinking; Will looked round when the man didn’t continue. He looked pale once more, licking his lips and trying to smile. Will didn’t push further. Brown’s slip was enough to go on for now.

“Well, thank you for all your help Mr. Brown,” he said once they’d reached the edge of the compound.

“Yeah,” Brown said, lips closed in a flat line; there was no offer of a parting handshake, for which Will was glad.

Watching the man walk back towards the offices, wide shoulders squared and legs moving like they were on ball joints, Will thought he could see why Matthew Brown might have been looking elsewhere for a father figure.

He knew he should have gone back to the office, but Will decided the County Public Library was a safer bet. No one to catch him there and demand updates or answers or anything he couldn’t give them. The chair in front of the digital archive was wobbly so Will swapped it out for another,

knowing he was going to be there for a while. He called up December nineteen ninety eight and began.

Two and three quarter hours later and he almost missed what he was looking for. His eyes were blurring when they scanned the small print, enough that he almost overlooked the small article on page twenty seven: ‘Tragic end to Baltimore Zoo Competition’. Will rubbed at his eyes and enlarged the article, hoping it wasn’t just a coincidence.

Tragic End to Baltimore Zoo Competition

Visitors and residents alike were shocked today at the grisly discovery at Baltimore Zoo. On September the fifteenth a competition was promoted by the Zoo for children to design the new meerkat habitat, offering a lifetime pass for the winner.

Unfortunately earlier this week one of the zookeepers, Sally Whitelaw, found the four meerkats and their cubs dead in their enclosure. It has not yet been stated how the meerkats were thought to have died, but the owner of the zoo had this to say.

“It is a tragedy, especially for the kids. I just hope we can all move past this and that people won’t think of this horrible thing when they come to visit.”

Several zookeepers have since been fired from the Zoo for negligence, as well as three walkouts. Sally Whitelaw, who discovered the meerkats, told us that she was happy to leave.

“I always liked it there, but I mean Mr. Brown was really generous with my money. He’s a nice guy. It’s such a shame.”

The manager had no comment to offer on the number of staff let go, or the reason for the high severance packages they were offered. It seems this may be a tragedy which is left unsolved.

Will sat back in his chair and stretched. The domed ceiling seemed absurdly far away, seen through his clasped fingers. Fits, he thought numbly, it all fits; *the violence, the lust, his past, all the non-sequiturs.* He could see Matthew, young and blank eyed, sitting in the middle of the curious meerkats until one drew close enough to grab, *hands around the neck, skin twisting underneath, breath gasping*...he let his arms drop suddenly, feeling his chest tighten painfully at the memory.

It fits, he reassured himself. Or you want it to fit, his conscience reminded him. No, he thought, no this is just more wood for the fire. He already knew, somehow he’d always known, the facts just hadn’t presented themselves. *Then why did you ignore it for so long*? The lips asked, laughing. Will rubbed at his eyes, knowing he was no longer thinking about Matthew. He forced his mind away from Hannibal and back to the problem at hand.

You can trust me, he heard Matthew say. Fuck, Will thought wryly, shaking his head. Trust. What a fucking fickle word. He stood up and shook out his legs before leaving, zipping up his jacket against the chill brought on by the setting sun. Will hurried to his car and sat, hands on the wheel, letting the engine warm to keep the heater hot.

What now? He asked himself. What now?

Jack was a bad idea without more to go on. Sure it would have been fine, if he’d been working the copycat case. Which he hadn’t. Well you were, he tried to argue, until suddenly everyone thought you might be made of glass. Will frowned angrily, warming his hands in front of the fans. If Alana

hadn't stuck her nose in where it didn't belong then this would be far smoother than it was. *She cares about you*. Yeah well she's got a funny way of showing it, he thought.

Ok, he thought, so more then. There has to be something concrete I can use. If I have something solid then Jack can bitch and moan as much as he likes but in the end he'll give in. Will leaned his head back against the headrest and felt his mind go blank. Shit, he thought with a sigh. Tired. No, *exhausted*. The long days, sleepless nights and stress were catching up with him. I need to sleep on this. Will put the car into gear and pulled out into the encroaching dusk.

He was half way home before he paid any real attention to the single light following behind him. He had noticed it at the last two junctions, just because he'd been checking his rear view mirror, but it hadn't been important. Then his gas warning light turned on. Will frowned, tapping at the dial on the dashboard. He'd been half full when he left, he was sure. He'd looked up for somewhere to park and that was when he taken notice of it. Still there, it was still there. Following him. A single light.

At the junction home Will turned right instead of left, remembering there was a Shell garage not far from where he was. The road grew darker, houses giving way to long, low factories, lit by orange sulphur. Half a mile from the nearest gas station Will felt his car give up. He felt his heart speed up as he looked into the rear view mirror and found it was still there. He pulled in to the side of the empty road and, only too late, realised where his subconscious hands had brought him.

Beech Grove sat all around him like a silent watcher. Will looked into his rear view mirror again.

The lone light which had followed him since he'd left the library stopped behind him and then, suddenly, winked out.

Riding the bike on his own had been more difficult than he'd anticipated, and unprotected had seemed foolish. He'd taken the helmet. His world became enclosed, driving slowly and carefully and, a few times, nearly crashing. Cold city lights passed by. Honking horns shifted over him in a Doppler effect, winking red lights and the bright white of car headlamps leaving imprints on his vision. Once he pulled over to catch his breath, gag. Bile was the only thing to find its way to his mouth. He spat it out and put the helmet back on.

Wind brushing against his hands, exposed, *everyone sees you.*

Not a long way to the familiar house. Not long. *Long enough*. He felt the knife in his jacket pocket as a heavy weight. Calm and calm and calm.

The skin beneath his hands twisted, gasping breath even as hands struggled.

Whatever you're doing with Will Graham...

Same key, same lock; Hannibal's door opened like an invitation. Walking inside seemed ineluctable, as much as it was to find Hannibal leaving the kitchen carrying a tray to the dining room. Will watched him walk past as if he were standing outside of his own body, observing. *Maybe you're not even here*, the lips whispered, *maybe you're not even awake, think of that*. He'd thought of that. He'd even wished on it once, before deciding that it was futile. He closed the door and stepped inside as he heard the voice speak, heard it as it haunted him.

You gonna hurt me? Huh? Haven't got the fuckin' guts! I'm gonna see him burn, god, see you all burn! *Fuck you doin'? Jesus, you..!*

Hannibal had expected him. Will knew it in the way his eyes lit up and his hands caught hold of him even as Will held the knife, unsure what he wished to do with it. Matthew had held it before Will had crushed his wrist and forced him to drop it. Now it was in his hand. They wrestled because Will couldn't think about why he wanted to see him die, just as couldn't think about why he wanted to see those arms around him, keeping him safe. The blade pushed against clean skin because he remembered seeing it before, in a dream somewhere, again and again. Hannibal's tanned flesh run with red.

"Are you happy?" he asked, though he didn't recognise his own voice, "Is this it?"

Hannibal had leaned in to place his face near to Will's neck, even with the knife against his throat, and drawn in a long breath through his nose. Will thought he remembered something, vague. Deja vu. He shook, then steadied himself.

"Tell me what has happened."

"Tell you? Tell you," Will laughed, soft and hoarse, "tell you what you already know?"

"You give me too much credit."

"*Too much credit*," Will repeated, still laughing, lifting his head to smack it forcefully back against the wall behind him, "oh god. Oh god. Maybe you're right, *haha*, maybe...maybe I killed him all on my own."

"Killed?" Hannibal looked positively taken aback; Will laughed again, this time a crackly sound breaking through the croakiness.

"You look so surprised," Will shook his head, "I wish I could capture it. I wish..." he felt deflated even as he stayed tense, straining against Hannibal, "I wish a lot of things. *God*."

"Surprised," Hannibal said, as if tasting the word, "yes. Perhaps. Though not for the reasons you seem to think."

"I don't want to hear it," Will said, feeling suddenly cold; memories rushing back in, thick and fast and unutterably real.

The skin felt thick and yet weak beneath his hands, thumbs latched over each other above the jugular. Words squeezed to nothing, *terrible, terrible words which cut at his world and made it bleed*. Matthew's eyes, wide and glassy and filled with elated fear. The body beneath him flopping like a wet fish as he crushed and crushed and did not let go until he felt the trembling pulse against his palm stutter to a halt.

He took a long, rasping breath. Hannibal was still there when he focused back to his reality. *Still there*. *Whatever you're doing with Will Graham* - stop.

"Tell me why."

"You do not remember," Lecter said somewhat incongruously, "do you. And why should you? It was nothing from your perspective, and yet everything from mine."

“Tell me *why*.”

“This was as you always expected it to be, or I would already be dead and would no longer understand why it was you looked at me the way you did. That night you came to me, fearful of Alana’s kiss and the animal inside your wall, clawing to get out,” Will watched a small smile creep to Hannibal’s lips, “it was a pleasure to watch you delude yourself.”

“You think I won’t do it,” Will watched the blade, the knife pressed against tender flesh, “You think I won’t, but you don’t know how many times I’ve imagined seeing your blood run and your eyes dim and *not given a good god damn*.”

“Oh, unlike you I do not enjoy delusion. Delusion is for the weak minded. Not for me. Not for you. Those who see beyond the lines left uncrossed. The way you look at me now, it is the same.”

“The same. The *same*,” his voice came as a whisper, “I can’t, I just...*please*.”

“The same, and yet different. It is simple, beautifully so, enough that I can ask it in one question alone.”

Matthew’s voice, angry and vengeful and vindicated. *Proof? You want proof? You haven’t got anythin’ on me.* Nothin’. *Some trumped up wacko with a temporary badge, you think they’ll listen to you? Huh? I’m gonna tear your fuckin’ life apart. You and your fuckin’ precious Doctor Lecter. And that girl. I’m gonna find that girl, the one you miss though you never say it. Abigail fuckin’ Hobbs. I’ll find her for you, Will, oh I’ll fuckin’ find her. Give her a better welcome than I gave Fisher. Ha! Your face, if you could see your face.*

“Tell me Will.”

Standing up, cold. The body at his feet no longer moved. Will felt absurdly calm, mind clouded. He looked up to find the stag snorting, pawing at the ground. Will shook his head. Too late, friend, he said. Too late.

He had told Jack, he thought, told him. Don’t be surprised. Was it much of a surprise? He wasn’t sure anymore. The world shifted and then righted itself. The woman’s words came back to him, Whatever you’re doing with Will Graham...*he felt alone. Briefly but utterly alone.*

“Tell me how it felt to watch him die.”

The knife fell away from his hand, the edge stained red. It clattered to the wooden floorboards loudly, ringing through the empty house. Will closed his eyes and felt unknown tears rush down across his cheeks. Yet his voice was clear and steady when he spoke.

“...Right,” he said softly, shaking his head; he allowed himself to lean forwards as Hannibal relaxed, pulling him closer. He felt as if he might be falling, *down into the abyss, where he found him waiting at the bottom*. The blood at Hannibal’s neck was a powerful and heady smell. He felt it rub slickly against his face and shivered, “it felt *right*.”

Silence. Hannibal held him tenderly, thumb seeming to stroke unconsciously back and forth across the nape of Will’s neck. When he was leaned gently back Hannibal reached up with his right hand to cup his cheek. His thumb moved out, smearing into the blood he could feel wet against his face, through the tracks of tears, until it reached his lips.

“It is amazing how complete is the delusion that beauty is goodness,” Hannibal whispered, “and yet sometimes I allow even myself to be fooled.”

“It doesn’t matter now,” Will heard himself say softly, lips moving against the thumb still placed there, tasting blood and salt; reality began to loom on the edge of his awareness. *You killed him*, “it’s over. I shouldn’t but...it’s over.”

“Where, Will? Where were you?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Then if it does not matter, you can tell me without consequence.”

“You just want to hear the irony,” he said, dragging in another pained breath, “that I ended up back at Beech Grove. You want to tell me how I took us back there, that this was my design, don’t you? The Ripper took us back there. You took us back there.”

“I have something you must see,” Hannibal said instead. He took his hand away and pulled a handkerchief from his pocket. He cleaned his hand as best he could and wiped at Will’s face tenderly, “before this is all over, as you say.”

The hand that took his was cold. Will allowed himself to be led to the dining room where he found the table set for three. *Set for three*, the lips said. Will could not stop his lips parting in shock, a thick wave of elation, fear and nausea rising with the girl who stood from her neatly set place at the table and ran into his arms.

“You’re ok!” Abigail was saying as Will held her, blinking; warm and real and she was glad, so glad to see him. Will felt weak and angry but unable to bow to either feeling. He closed his eyes and hugged her tightly. The world seemed to be cemented as surreal by this sudden and final turn of the screw.

“You came back,” he said, because it’s what he would have if he hadn’t the blood on his hands and the madness in his mind that he thought he might, “sweetheart we were so worried about you.”

“Are you hurt?” she asked, pulling back to look at him, “Is that blood?”

“It’s ok,” he shook his head, smiling sadly, pulling her close once more, “god I missed you so much.”

“Missed you too,” she said, muffled against his jacket.

So little left, but this was what you had to lose. Everyone has something to lose, even the ones who think they have nothing. *They’ll come for you*. Will wondered if Jack would be surprised. Probably not. Beverly, yes. She would be hurt, he knew she would. He felt guilty, even as he looked up at Hannibal as the man moved to his side. Will watched as he ran a gentle hand over Abigail’s raven hair before cupping the back of Will’s head and placing a chaste kiss against his forehead.

“I have some things to attend to, I might return late,” he said; Will felt as if he were swimming through a dream, “supper is in the kitchen.”

Chapter End Notes

Post mortem apologies to CyncialOrange, especially after promising to try my best and keep Will above water. Unfortunately I feel he was too far under already. But don't count him out just yet.

And there will be a more detailed explanation of Will's murder of Matthew next chapter, I promise not to leave you hanging there.

As ever, I feel I have borrowed from 'The Administration' again with Matthew's outburst about Hannibal wanting Will's love. When Carnac says the same to Toreth, it's such a gut clenching scene that I can't help but love it even as I hate it.

Also Tolstoy, which Hannibal quoted (because he would, wouldn't he), "It is amazing how complete is the delusion that beauty is goodness". Read Tolstoy, all of you. He is a master. And Huxley, go read 'Doors of Perception'. Can't get better than something written by a wonderful prose writer when high off his face on mescalin.

And last but not least, there was too little Bedelia in that chapter I think. She'll be back.

Saute D'humeur

Chapter Notes

Because Will isn't done tearing himself in fifteen different directions, even as he goes forwards only in one.

Title translation :
Saute D'humeur - Mood switch/Mood change

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The light was diffused, as if through polarised glass. Milky and still. He had been laying there for a time, unable to focus on his surroundings. The gilt mirror which reflected the high headboard and wall to where it met the ceiling above the bed, the cold fireplace, the twin armchairs sitting as if in a close conversation with each other. The dim light covered everything. *Including the eyes in the corner, watching.*

If he stopped and thought further than the doorway, half hidden behind the bedpost, real life would pour in through the gap left ajar. He would drown in the rising waters because he knew it was too much to hope that he would kick his legs and move his arms to save himself.

He closed his eyes and then opened them, trying to imagine he was somewhere else. Yet in truth it was only the thin, white, muslin curtains, peeking out to cover the gap between the darker, heavier drapes that made the world seem pale. Will blinked his dry eyes and watched dust motes glide slowly through the strip of wan sunlight, winking in and out of existence. Felt the greasy stare of another upon his bare skin.

On the window ledge, against the faint light, sat the man-stag; crouched and curled and watching him. Will turned his head to the left and stared back, pillow beneath his cheek. The white eyes appeared sightless, yet fixed upon him. The mouth opened to reveal stark white teeth.

“The enemy lies with its enemy,” it sneered, “how fitting.”

“There wasn’t any other way it could be,” Will added, voice nothing but a whisper.

“You have submitted.”

“Don’t think you know me. Don’t label me blind.”

Yet the words sat like a heavy burden upon his body. Uncomfortable, just as the true weight on top of him was a comfort. Hannibal was still asleep, despite the clock reading half past twelve, curled around him like a protective shell.

He hadn’t thought it would be like this, would have thought it suffocating or panicked. There was a time when a touch against his body meant more than a person’s life was worth. Once he’d nearly walked out into traffic just to retreat from a man who’d walked into him in the street. His father’s grip had been all that halted him, keeping him close with an authority which overrode anxiety.

Accidental contact was somewhat traumatising. The thought of skin against skin barely even registered, for how baffling and wrong the concept was.

So fifteen year old Will would have never comprehended the idea of this. Lying naked on luxuriant sheets, his back and legs cradled by fresh Egyptian cotton while the feeling of hot skin between his thighs, a broad chest pressed against his abdomen, arms against and hands grasping his sides, leading up to a long throat lifted against his stomach and a head laying cheek down against his chest; reassuring, rather than a list of reasons why he'd have a panic attack.

He chanced a look down at the head, nothing but a half dome of hair obscuring nearly everything but fingers and forearms and the edges of shoulders. It moved up and down rhythmically with his breathing.

"He did not see you coming," the stag said, "but there was all the more pleasure for it."

"A surprise," Will grimaced at his choice of words, "not just for him. I...shouldn't have done it. I'm not sure I can survive this."

"No one ever 'should have'. You do not know yet what you are."

"I'm where I shouldn't have," Will felt the grimace tick to a smile, then disappear, "I have an...understanding, of your state of mind."

"We're just alike," it cocked its head minutely to the left; Will saw Hannibal in the action, "this gives you the capacity to deceive me. And be deceived by me."

"I'm sure," Will laughed wryly, low in his chest, "Hannibal has a certain personality style we can all learn from. In moderation, of course."

"Of course," it mimicked, and Will felt sick at the thought.

The thought of what he was now tickled his conscience unpleasantly. The chess piece dallying on the near side of a fatal move; *take or be taken*. Will could barely see the difference anymore in his twin roles. Yet there was a difference, it was there, *a sliver of light shining through like a crack in the door to a darkened room.* When this had all begun it had been simple, as much as such a thing could be simple anyway. He'd been angry. No, too tame a word. Furious, livid, scarred. Reeling from the treachery, from the guilt and, to an extent, mortification that he had trusted a man capable of abusing him for sheer entertainment. Allowed his presence in his house, in amongst his pack, inside his head to poke around at the quaint objects and smile his enigmatic smile. Into his bed to test how far it could be taken, into his hands as he had beaten Abel Gideon half to death. Into his job, beside his colleagues, the few friends he still possessed, the people who trusted him. Into his life as he'd dangled Abigail like the sword of Damocles above his head.

So the anger had fuelled his resentment, and his resentment had fuelled his want to see Hannibal for what he truly was, and in seeing Hannibal for what he truly was Will Graham had decided that the monster needed a cage; a cage of his own making. A real cage, a true confinement. That Hannibal Lecter was a beast that would not submit, and such a beast would either be trapped or die in the attempt.

And it was sickening to know that the very thought of him dead made Will reel. *Hatred and betrayal and embarrassment and pain and misery*; all of it led to nothing more than an urgent need to have Hannibal behind bars, partly because of his moral standing, and partly because Will wanted

him away, far gone, so that the feelings he harboured would never have to see light of day. Or be explained.

To become his whole world. Will had thought it was a simple tactic, and perhaps best to be so. *To hold the life of another in his hands*, and resist crushing it completely. Will laid his head back against the pillows and shivered. You have him, his mind taunted, you have him here in your arms. The Chesapeake Ripper, ripe for the picking. Exhausted and blood stained, you've pushed yourself past the edge of redemption and now you doubt yourself? Will found himself frowning at the thought which hovered at the edge of his consciousness, trying to endear itself to him like a coy smile: Even a good fisherman sometimes threw back his catch.

For the promise of a greater reward.

Of course trying to believe that Hannibal was capable of true feeling was perhaps the greatest obstacle, and Will knew it shouldn't be. He knew that, in his decision to bring about the downfall of the man currently cradling him like a precious thing, he had fallen prey to the one thing he was capable of offering which no other could. *Understanding, and true, unmitigated acceptance*. Perhaps the most he could ever hope for. The lure was great and powerful, and Will wasn't sure how long he could stop himself from reaching out to grab it.

The duvet had been kicked down at some point during the night - *morning?* - and now Hannibal provided the only cover against the cool air of the bedroom. It was a suitable replacement, Hannibal was incredibly warm despite his hands nearly always being chill to the touch. Where Hannibal's hands rested against the sides of his ribcage Will thought he could feel his own heat feeding back out into the man. Some sort of odd symbiosis. The creeping figure at the edge of his vision continued to crawl.

"You can see him," the stag said, a hiss to its voice, "because you know what to look for."

"No, not just..." Will hesitated, wondering at himself that he would continue conversing with the blatant apparition.

"Perhaps not," it grinned, stark white teeth against ebony, "perhaps you're right. You don't see it. You *are* it. You know him because you are him. Such sweet symmetry."

"I..."

He could have replied, denied, *lied*. Instead he reached up and around and delicately ran his hand over fine, messy brown hair, ferreting out the grey streak running from Hannibal's temple. Hannibal did not wake under the scrutiny. Will was glad. Having him awake meant understanding that the stag to whom he spoke and the man atop him were one and the same. Here, with his mind separating the two, Will could see the beast while keeping the rest safe; *watch death while holding its victims out of reach.*

Overall, an impossibility. Will smiled in the manner of a man who understood that smiling was appropriate at certain moments. Impossible: he hated the word, because it was a universal truth. Some things were always out of reach. He mussed silky strands between his fingers and felt the pulse at his fingertips, pressed against the skull. He caught Hannibal's hot breath against his wrist and his eyes shuttered. The world blinked in and out, on and off, *the sun through the blinds.* Will wondered if the impossible word would keep him from always reaching.

In the three long days since he'd shown up at the door with a knife tucked in his hand and a fear deep in his throat that he could barely voice, Will had been moving in a malaise. An antithetical numbness which tore at him as it anaesthetised. It's real, was all he could think for a time, as he heard breakfast served in the dining room and Abigail's voice on the air. The blood was real, even if it wasn't visible. Hot and on his hands and all his own doing.

They'll come for you*, they'll come for you*. It had run circles in his head as he sat at the table, cutting into the poached egg and watching the yolk run. Hearing the voices before him raised in polite conversation. Avoided Abigail's searching eyes and tried not to crack, *because he was close, so close,* and yet...

...there was no one kicking in the door, no cuffs around his wrists, no blank stares of his colleagues watching him marched to the van and pushed inside while they thought *it was inevitable, only a matter of time before he snapped like a twig.* Because Will was the sidelined shadow, until he was forced to be seen. Until the line was crossed and suddenly no one was able to ignore him any longer.

For a time all he was able to think was that there was no other way for it to be but this. *I'm a good fisherman, Jack*. He'd told him that. *Don't be surprised.* He'd told him that too. Both worked, both fit. He was the hunter and the hunted, all rolled into a tight little package of red hands and a scratched mind. Only Will had been happy to lay himself on the tracks before the train, ready to let the Ripper tear him apart in order to catch him, until suddenly his life was thrown back in his face, caught with fumbling hands.

"*I missed you too,*" the stag imitated her voice, Abigail's words out of the devil's mouth.

"You leave her out of this," Will could hear the desperation in his voice.

"She belongs to us. We're her father's now."

"Can't slice her life apart any more than it already is. She deserves better than us. We're barely fit to care for each other, never mind her."

"Liar. You doubt him as you doubt yourself."

"Don't throw my words back at me."

"You can't admit how much you've fallen," the stag hopped down, standing up straight to stretch its antlers tall, "as to admit it would be to damn yourself."

Another truth; just as much as impossibility was, so was it that he couldn't deny it. His feelings weren't controllable. That was the excuse he'd given himself. Who was he to choose who he loved? He was beginning to come to the conclusion that he was perfectly capable of being in love with Hannibal Lecter, as much as he truly despised him.

That he was capable of loathing the man who currently lay contentedly atop him, with his cold, analytical callousness and his inability to ever care just how much Will had sacrificed, just as much as he craved his touch and his voice, the intense and reverent passion in Hannibal's eyes whenever they landed upon him. The *want* in him. That his own torn and mutilated identity sought, crawling, the last semblance of likeness in another that it could find. The last chance to be with someone who would accept him for whatever he was.

And yet know that to love him was to destroy him.

“You would,” the stag spat, “You would take his trust and ring it until it choked. You would take a rare gift and burn it upon the fire.”

“It’s not a gift,” Will said, hearing the catch in his voice. He laid his hand upon the back of Hannibal’s neck and swallowed, “it’s a noose with which to hang myself.”

“A lie to help you sleep at night,” the stag sneered as it crawled up across the armchairs by the fire, stretching unnaturally as it lowered itself to the floor, hands reaching for the rumpled duvet, “you wish nothing more than to run like the prey that you are.”

“I don’t need to run,” Will whispered, “not anymore.”

What was difficult was understanding himself. *You can’t be two people*, *you’ll tear each other limb from limb*. It was true yet inevitable. Will felt himself as two monsters trapped in one territory. In the end, one of them would lie on the ground with its throat ripped out. He knew which. The Will with his sense of virtue and need to protect and know right from wrong and do his best to keep that delineation clear would be no match for the wretched thing that had dragged itself out of the cage, grinning and opening newborn eyes. The longer he lay where he was, the more he knew what he would become were he to stay this close. Having Hannibal close. Wanting and needing him. Feeding the understanding for that which should not be understood.

Because he had been ready to arrest him, stupid piece of shit*, hunkered down on the ground in Beech Grove in the sickly light of the warehouse, tying Matthew Brown’s wrists behind him as he spat and heaved and laughed. Been ready to call Jack with shaking hands, tell him everything, do it by the book. The knife that had only moments before been at his neck still lay upon the floor, blade catching the light.*

Then Matthew had opened his mouth. Young, rash and violent; it was obvious in his words. His promises, his threats. And Will had been unable to tear himself away from the memory of Fisher, wretched and dead, his wife bloodied, and Lehrwood’s sick, terrified thoughts, and the memory of Hannibal’s lips against his face as Will lay drugged and barely conscious, repeating everything the man told him to.

And that, in the end, killing him had barely moved the world an inch. He had expected a change, a thrill, a shiver, a rush, a flood of remorse, a wave of guilt, a realisation. Instead he stood up, shaking slightly, and looked down at the open eyes and pale skin of the man who had once touched him with terrible affection, told him that he cared about him, hurt him and fucked him and comforted him and...and taken a bone saw to an innocent man because he looked just like Will. Because deep down everything that had come out of Matthew Brown’s mouth had been a variation upon a lie. Will wasn’t sure how much he was supposed to believe and, now that Brown was dead, he never would.

The worst moment, unbelievably, had been realising why he’d done it. Not just for the threats, not just the fear that Brown wouldn’t be convicted, that he’d be free to hurt others, that he’d be a danger to Hannibal and Abigail and Will himself. No, they were factors. The worst moment was realising that as he’d watched Matthew die Will had known, deep down, that at least this would be a believable smokescreen. That Hannibal would sure let go of any lingering doubts he had and pull Will as close to him as he dared.

That killing Matthew Brown might land him the Ripper.

That Will had become so inured to death that he was now doling it out in a mercenary fashion.

That was when the shock set in, and the cold had descended upon his body.

Will stared down across Hannibal's back as the pitch points of thick antler-nests breached the horizon of the bed, rising up and up until the snarling face of the stag emerged, arms outstretched and crawling its way up across the borders, up over the bed. It slunk like tar through water, dribbling and puffing out, eyes stayed trained upon him with an avid hunger. *As if it wanted to tear and chunk out and chew*. Teeth bared. Will lay still, watching, tightening his hold upon Hannibal.

"Who are you to judge us," hissed a mouth downturned at the edges, "you are one whose hands are already stained."

"You can take us both," Will countered, his voice wavering, "take us. We'll deserve it, in the end. Whatever end that might be."

"Oh?" it asked, face close enough to Hannibal's back to run its tongue through the dip of his spine as it crawled up across him; Will's fingers itched to dig into its sightless eyes, watch it squirm in pain before it died, "I would not have thought yourself the fitting sacrifice."

"Don't be surprised," Will said, hating the irony.

Yet sometimes the thoughts that flitted their way through his head were so alien and terrifying that he barely recognised himself. *Matthew Brown had deserved to die.* That it was his duplicity, *redeemer and destroyer,* as well as his assimilation that allowed Hannibal's chaste kisses, his rough touches, his wet lips and biting teeth, because some part of him hoped he was being led closer and closer to the root of what he was, what Hannibal truly was. That he was right to kill Brown *and rid this world of his unique brand of pleasure at the expense of others.* To feel Hannibal's inquisitive glances, which only served to remind Will that half of the reason Hannibal seemed so infatuated with him was down to sheer curiosity, and that made Will feel like curling up in a corner to never come out again. *That the man above you deserves that same fate as all the other mad dogs you've put down.*

That this was the best he could ever hope for and it held the power to destroy him in its hands, any time it pleased. As much as he had the power to destroy it in return.

So he'd sat back and watched, unable to do more than that as the hours slipped past and Hannibal and Abigail moved around him as if waiting for him to wake. To wake up and see them. And Hannibal treated him like a delicate thing, as if he might break if held too tightly, never to go back together quite right. Touches against his arm, looking up to find Hannibal watching him only for the man's eyes to slide away as if they had never been, being led from room to room and spoken to quietly, carefully. Taken to bed and cherished. Will had clung to him that first night, shaking as he spat out vicious words and hated that he didn't resist. That he'd allowed himself to be served upon a silver platter, hands bound and heart heavy.

The most insurmountable point had not been Hannibal wresting control smoothly from the hands of others, but more that Will himself had allowed it. *You're a fucking madman*, he had told himself. He couldn't argue with the logic. That there was no sign of Matthew Brown, as if he had never existed, and that Will was truly supposed to accept that and move on. He remembered making Hannibal drive him out to Beech Grove, and being truly surprised by the lack of resistance he met. Until he'd stepped inside the warehouse and found nothing staring back at him; empty and

untouched. Watched as Hannibal delighted in toying with his reality, seeing how far he could push it, warp it, stretch it before it ruptured.

Will closed his eyes as the stag drew near enough to lie flat across Hannibal's back, a pitch succubus, a licentious truth. It was easier to believe it did not exist, *which it did not*, and instead allow himself to focus on what he felt.

The goose bumps on his arms and the sides of his legs made him shiver, rippling up his spine. He wanted to move, shift the weight on his back which had seized up during his uneasy sleep. Instead he allowed his hand to run down from the soft hair between his fingers to the nape of Hannibal's neck, the short strands tapering to a neatly trimmed line. Will was deciding to allow himself the small things, as they were easier to understand. Enjoying the touch of warm skin beneath his fingers. The broad expanse of Hannibal's back under his palm, hiding strong, powerful muscles. Wide shoulders that tapered down to a narrow waist, beneath the dishevelled covers.

Will was deciding to allow himself the smile at the thought. Not the panicked grimace that was demanding its right to be there. He opened his eyes, still running his hand up into hair, then down onto neck and then tracing as much spine as he could feel before the strain on his arm was too much, then back up again. All as the stag leaned up and over Hannibal, eclipsing the light, to reach in and speak at his ear.

"*Killer*," it whispered.

"You can't frighten me with the truth," Will replied steadily.

What separates us? He even heard it in his lecturer's voice, *What separates us from them?* Lecturing on the psychology of psychopaths would become old hat to him, yet when he'd first become interested in Doctor Hastings' classes he was one of the few who managed to stick with him. A tough old veteran, with enough bad memories and quick intelligence not to suffer fools gladly. Will remembered he had asked that question in his third class, with a slide on arterial neck wounds looming in the background. The sort of black and white question that demands there be a noticeable divide between *us* and *them*; between the chasers and the chased. Will had never been willing to accept that it was as distinct as Hastings claimed, not that he would push the issue when asked. *What separates us from them?*

Regret. It had been his only conclusion. Regret was what separated them. Remorse for what had been done. It was what separated the scale, the echelle de cruaute, as it rose and rose until the people it represented were so far beyond anyone's understanding that they became alien, abominations; except to others who perpetrated the same atrocities. *Regret*. Will swallowed and wondered, briefly, where he would place himself upon the scale. He wished it were lower than the number he chose and yet momentarily realised it wasn't that simple.

Hannibal's voice: *All of them and none of them*. The Chesapeake Ripper had taken his fair share of disillusionment and psychopathy, worked his way up and down the list as if he were a man with something to prove; and Will had done the same, even if only in his mind. Unfortunately for him, it was his most prolific inspiration. *You've been all of them and none of them*. Will knew he'd imagined it, felt it, *needed* it. He needed it more than he'd needed a quiet life. Nothing he could accept would ever be without death and violence. A love hate relationship, even as he strove to keep others safe from the darkness he suffered under.

The bits you regret are the crumbs, he forced himself to accept. The inconsequential pieces that flake away, not the main body, the thing which you *should*...the body that you left cooling in the

abandoned warehouse, rotting in the shadows. Do you regret it? he asked himself.

Do you?

The light brightened, indicating the sun had come out from behind the clouds. Will half shut his eyes against the glare and felt the weight atop him move marginally. Will was distracted in wondering if, with his face pressed tightly against Will's chest, it was his speedy heartbeat that had woken Hannibal more than the morning sun.

Memories of the night before, or maybe that morning to be more precise, were somewhat hazy but Will thought he remembered seeing Hannibal looking up at him as he did now; face turned half up, chin resting against his breastplate, eyes intense and yet expression calm as he surveyed him through long, thick lashes. The stag grinned as it slid down under the sheets, white eyes the last thing to disappear as it slunk away in a shiver of material. The threat of its re-emergence did not leave him.

“I hope it is not sooner than midday,” were the first words out of Hannibal’s mouth, his slushy sibilants always more pronounced in the few minutes after waking; the sound sent an unmitigated spike of pleasure up Will’s spine, despite his best intentions. Or perhaps because of them. *Simpler to see the easy pleasure than the tricky pain.*

“Did I wake you?”

“Not at all,” Hannibal replied, turning his head to once more lay his cheek back against Will’s skin; Will returned his hand to its previous distractions and felt Hannibal sigh happily.

Quiet returned. Will felt Hannibal’s breathing even out but knew the man hadn’t fallen back to sleep. Will carded his hand through his hair again, trying to find the parting and move each hair exactly into place. It was time consuming and distracting; everything he needed. Left, right, spangled grey covered and uncovered. After what turned out to be another twenty minutes, if the clock was to be trusted, Hannibal slid his right hand down from where it held Will’s chest beneath his armpit and began kneading his exposed thigh with long fingers.

Will remembered the night before, *or morning he reminded himself again*, he had spread his legs when Hannibal had made it clear he was not moving from where he lay atop him like a blanket, mainly to avoid pins and needles. Now he found he’d only allowed himself to be utterly vulnerable beneath a man more than capable of exploiting weaknesses for his own ends.

You let him. Will’s next breath skipped a beat, stuttering, as he found himself searching the room for the stag. Will hated himself for his want to believe in the delusion. Believing the delusion allowed for his continued calm in the face of great horror. Did the regret come there, if it came at all? Regret that he’d allowed himself to be manoeuvred, not the act itself. *You let him touch you*. Will was well aware of what he let Hannibal do.

Well aware.

When Hannibal began placing soft kisses against Will’s stomach, he knew his eyes were blank. He squirmed a little as Hannibal’s left hand found its way up to his collarbone, running lazy circles up and down over the bump.

As he looked to the ceiling Will thought about how he’d always seen the Ripper in his mind’s eye. It helped; *compartmentalisation.* How he’d felt when he’d allowed himself as dangerously close to

being the Ripper as he could. How it had felt when he'd crossed that line. Certain things had been prominent in his understanding of the man, but never desire or passion in the way others would understand it. Normal men loved and lusted and cared and doubted and were afraid. The Chesapeake Ripper was certainly not a man, more a wretched creature. They type that was born malformed and squalling, left to die in a room somewhere with no light or sound.

Hannibal Lecter had been neither, not man nor beast, until Will had known him for what he truly was. He was '*a want to create while utterly destroying'*. A dichotomy. One with a fine understanding of life and death and everything in between, but utterly lacking in the ability to care. He was one for whom there was no room for love or lust.

So the words came out of his mouth without his thinking about it, "Didn't think this was important to you," he said, unsure how to voice something he'd been fearing since he'd finally realised everything that was worth realising.

"Not with others," Hannibal replied bluntly, without hesitation.

"Oh?"

"I had a feeling, when we first met," Hannibal cleared his throat but it did nothing to rid it of its huskiness, "that you were hiding something greater beneath your shabby suit and thick rimmed glasses. Something only I could see but not touch."

"Are you trying to foster co-dependency, doctor?" Will asked dryly.

"Is that what I'm doing?"

"So coy," Will said, affecting outrage, "it's what you did with Abigail. Don't deny it, it is. I'd be insulted that you'd think I wouldn't notice you were trying to trap me, although perhaps I'm insulted that you clearly thought it the only way to make me stay."

"You are unpredictable. I could never predict you. Unpredictable things need to be herded."

"Like cattle to slaughter?"

"I'd prefer a metaphor somewhat less...abattoir."

"You're really no good at pillow talk."

"I like talking to you," Hannibal smiled, disturbingly genuine, "it reminds me I am not unique."

"You whispered to me," Will said, eyes creasing.

"But you always replied in your own voice."

"I don't forgive you. Don't think that for a minute."

"Wouldn't dream of it. It is enough that you allow yourself this beautiful conflict you suffer. The butterfly spreading its wings. The chrysalis has cradled it for so long."

"Is that really how you see me?" Will asked blankly, "Pointing to my broken wings is hardly the best place to start."

“Actually I was referring more to your unmitigated sensuality. A curse that has toppled kings and empires. Somehow it is even more intoxicating when the bearer is entirely oblivious to his own power,” the hand at his thigh had moved back up to his hip, the heel grinding down into the dip in his pelvis. Will jerked involuntarily and his lips parted in a puff of air.

“Strange,” Will said, eyes becoming firmly shut even as he felt Hannibal lift himself effortlessly up on his left arm, looming over him.

“Mmm?”

“Didn’t think you’d be so carnal.”

“You are talking as if I have suddenly metamorphosed into another, and not simply remained who I am. Are your preconceptions so deeply ingrained?”

“Maybe just deeply planted,” Will slit his eyes open and found Hannibal leaning in to place soft lips against the hollow of his throat, “there was a time I thought I might be him and he might be me.”

“Again you talk as if another entity exists entirely.”

“That’s how it felt.”

“Would you tell me more? Of how you felt?” Will frowned, pushing his face against Hannibal’s neck as the man caressed his throat, right hand slipping up and over his pelvis to brush the curls by his straining cock.

Dangerous territory. He had only talked of it in whispers, of his stuttering, straining transformation. He said his piece to the stag because it was not real. Will was sure that if he continued to talk of these things to a creature which did not exist, then that of which he spoke could not be true. The fantasy could only last so long, but was enough of a prize to have him try.

And so...“I’d have you touch me,” he said instead, hoping for a compromise.

“Such a selfish creature,” there was a smile on Hannibal’s voice.

“Please,” he said, “later. Let the dust settle, Hannibal. Please.”

“Later, then,” in a voice reverent in the face of Will’s supplication.

Yet there was a want in him still, Will could feel it in the tension in Hannibal’s arms, his hands, the trapped energy in his movements. So before later came, Will found Hannibal’s long, skilled fingers grasping his cock gently as a firm mouth pressed against his own, demanding entrance. Will felt the tongue push inside because he had opened his lips, *relented*, lifting his left hand to touch Hannibal’s neck, grip him, hold him in place as if doing so would keep him as *him* and not the black antlered beast crouching beneath the covers, waiting to emerge.

You see. And Will knew it was true. He’d known, always known. Only he was good at denial, a master. Enough that happiness, when presented, was enough to be cherished at all costs and protected above all else. Or destroyed for the sake of others...

Will’s forehead creased as he let out a long, greedy moan into Hannibal’s waiting mouth. He refused point blank to think about Abigail’s happiness when he had spent the morning running his

fingers through Hannibal's hair and thinking about man's capability for damning ugliness and ethereal beauty, about his own hands dipping into the tar, about Hannibal's hands on him, making him hard enough to submit, while trying to hide from exactly what it was he was doing.

Because anything else was too much to comprehend; that he was allowing the Chesapeake Ripper to slide a finger inside him, caressing until there was enough room for two and then Will was panting and his grip on the back of Hannibal's neck was bruising and when Hannibal kissed him again Will begged with an open mouth for the man to take him.

The same hands that had sliced skin from muscle, pushed a crowbar through a man's sternum and made it look simple, tucked a man's tongue into a bible with a smile, the same skin and hair that had never fallen or left itself behind, the same ghost that had slain a countless line of corpses stretching back and back until they could no longer be seen.

He stared up into maroon eyes, with panted breath against his face, swallowing him whole, "Would you give yourself to me?" Hannibal would have sounded curious were he not so out of breath.

"You know it's too late for me to turn back now," Will whispered.

A bruising kiss. Will ground his lips and tongue against him, panting in breath at any chance he got. Matthew's face flashed up behind his eyelids, pale and grinning. *Killed him, you killed him*. Will felt his hand slip towards Hannibal's throat and his mouth went dry. *Tighter, tighter, until his fingers felt numb from lack of blood past white knuckles.* The fingers inside him crooked and Will huffed out a tight breath, pulling his left heel up towards his body, bending his leg until his knee pointed to the ceiling as he lifted his hips. *You fucking hypocrite, you fucking dirty liar.*

"Please," he squeezed out, "oh god please."

"You do not even know what it is that you want, do you," Hannibal was breathless but composed.

"You," Will knew that was the truth at least.

"And who am I?"

"The man who sees me...oh *god* there, *yes*," Will found his voice frittering away into incoherent pleading as his head lolled to the left and his body was rocked with pleasure. For a moment or two he was allowed to slip into it, this hedonistic bliss, as if nothing else existed. Will watched the dust motes swim and felt his toes curl with the building want in his gut. Hannibal was once more at his neck, kissing at sensitive flesh with a suitably indecorous mouth, talking and talking into his ear as Will tried his best not to concentrate, only to feel.

"Riding agrees with you, Will. Puts colour in your cheeks. You've contracted a bloom. May I applaud myself? Perhaps that would be too unseemly. Although I am sure I should congratulate myself. You are positively radiant."

When he finally managed to pull his head back to centre and look at the man above him, Hannibal's mouth was shut and his eyes were bright and inquisitive, yet darkened. They always seemed darker when they fell upon him. Will watched as Hannibal slowly withdrew his fingers and reached up to place his hand over Will's own, still tight against the side of Hannibal's throat. The breath stuck in his chest as his hand was guided over tanned skin to rest against a prominent adam's apple. Will felt it swallow against his palm and his vision blurred.

“It is said that the soul of another can find those sensitive to their presence,” Hannibal’s hand tightened around Will’s own as he spoke; just enough, *but not enough*, to make his voice slightly strained, “I am not one to fall into superstition. Yet I wonder, how many spirits have passed through you and left themselves behind? Or is it the other way around, perhaps? How much of this desire is truly your own?”

“You think I doubt you,” Will asked, breathless, unable to find the eloquence Hannibal found effortless, “because you think someone understanding you is unimaginable?”

“You only see doubt, and not the fear it hides,” Hannibal said, head tipped marginally to the right, “or the things it makes you do.”

“Not afraid of you Hannibal,” Will murmured, realising it was true as the words hit the still air.

Not afraid of the cuts, with the stripped wounds and curious eyes watching grotesque creations. *Was afraid* of being fooled and left alone, broken, hateful, *lost.*

And the thrill came as he licked his lips and experimentally squeezed tighter with the hand around Hannibal’s throat. Hannibal watched him, eyes fluttering and face twitching only once: when Will knew it was tight enough to stop the air flow. A strict connection through the threat of death, and the bilious and exquisitely electric feelings that came with it. Killing Matthew had been almost mundane, if it weren’t for his nagging conscience. The mere thought of struggling with Lecter over the man’s life...

Then he let go. It was too much to comprehend. *I’ve seen you die enough times at my hands*, he thought. No matter that the song between them sung of the wretched creature who deserved death more than any of them; the Ripper, the sadist, the man of no remorse and endless talent for finding fresh prey. When his hold loosened Hannibal also let go, dropping his hand to Will’s shoulder, then sliding down to his hip in one long motion, index and middle fingers sticky against his skin.

“Perhaps I find that foolish,” Hannibal said bluntly.

“We like to do things that don’t make much sense to others,” Will squirmed as Hannibal settled himself further down between his thighs, dipping to brush his erection against Will’s own.

“I have always understood you, Will.”

“I’m not sure that’s true. Sometimes I didn’t even understand myself.”

“You mimic. You give what others expect. With Jack, pride. With Beverly, hope. With Alana, envy. With Matthew...”

“Spite,” Will finished flatly.

“I would have chosen anger.”

“No, it ended in anger,” Will sighed, licking his lips as Hannibal softly began to roll his hips, “it started with spite.”

“For him?”

“For you, and you know it. You know why...*god that’s...*” Will gasped as Hannibal began working his stiff flesh once more.

“You had to see it for yourself. I could not be the one to show you. Forcing would only have ended in tears.”

“It almost did, but you decided drugging and kidnapping me was preferable to an explanation.”

“You were not ready then. I could not let you react rashly and ruin the last chance we both had.”

“For a family?”

“To be happy. Are you?”

“Right now,” Will said, sucking a breath through his teeth as Hannibal ran his stiff cock down the cleft of his arse, rubbing the heel of his hand against Will’s prick sitting trapped against his abdomen, “I think I might say yes to anything.”

“The truth, please.”

“You’re such a killjoy,” Will said, feeling delirious, then laughed, stopped to frown then laughed again, longer and quieter; *Jesus fucking Christ he’s killed people, so many people*. Don’t think, just answer, “yes, I’m happy. I didn’t think I was allowed to be. Worried I’ll wake up and find myself in a cold cell. Think I still might. *Fuck*...please, if you’re going to do it just *do it* already.”

You condemn him, yet you’ve killed people too, Will thought. *Not the same*. Oh, it’s the same. It’s the fucking same alright. The law liked to pat Will on the back and thank him for taking out the garbage with a quick bullet. *But now Matthew*...there would be no medal there. There would only be tight bars and a straight jacket were the truth ever to emerge. Will felt the quivering laugh shake his insides, twisting to a groan as he felt the head of Hannibal’s cock breach him.

He couldn’t help but tense, “Just relax,” Hannibal muttered by his ear as the man leaned in to cover him, chest pressed against chest, “I would not hurt you.”

Slow at first, *that’s how it started*, hips rocking forwards until he was pressed deep, *drawn in because you saw something you wanted?* The next thrust stuttered, *because you saw the dark eyes in the thicket and they spoke to you*, fingers digging in, *and when the darkness crept up you lifted the covers and invited it inside,* hot breath condensing against his neck, *and the remote chance of finding the one creature who’d spoken to you before you even knew his face was too enticing to pass up.*

When Hannibal began replying Will realised he was saying the words he heard in his head out loud, murmured between rough breaths. First a muttered curse as Will lifted his leg and wrapped his ankle over the small of Hannibal’s back, then a brief question lost to the short, sharp breaths he was hauling into his lungs as the thrusts became uncontrolled, then ‘you saw me, you always saw me’, pressed between tight teeth as Hannibal began to lose control and Will held him close and relished the feeling.

By the time he came Hannibal had his hips up off the bed, one of Will’s arms dangling off the side, slamming down into him as his teeth sank into the flesh where his shoulder met his neck, and Will couldn’t help but cry out “ah, Christ, *ah fuck!*” as Hannibal continued on even as Will shook from the boneless afterglow mixed with the animalistic ferocity of Hannibal’s love making.

Soon he found himself gasping in a crushing grasp, held tightly as hips rolled, grinding deep inside again and again. Hannibal seemed unwilling to risk being far enough apart to merit fucking Will

into the mattress. Will held on as best he could at the odd angle, not quite sitting in Hannibal's lap but not quite lying down on the bed. He crammed his chin into the crook of Hannibal's shoulder and breathed out soft reassurances, even as his voice hitched at the cock deep inside him making his own jump and twitch.

If asked what he had said he wouldn't remember, other than he thought he might have told Hannibal that he loved him, had for a long time; and that when Hannibal came, sweaty and shaking and buried deep enough inside and wrapped tight enough around Will that he wasn't sure if their flesh was one and the same, that a familiar word escaped Hannibal in a tight growl, "*neikada, neikada*".

He had neither the energy nor the means to ask what it meant.

Slowly Hannibal lowered them back to the bed, erratic breathing returning to nothing but the usual, calm flow through a long elegant nose. He did not pull out and Will made no attempt to move. It was comforting and yet terrifying to allow the man this close, *closer, closest*, and yet know what he was capable of. What he had done. *What he did*. Will felt the urge to laugh again but managed to dampen it. *You're here to take him to hell along with you.* Instead he ran his palm through the sheen of sweat between Hannibal's shoulder blades and pushed his nose against damp hair. Eventually Hannibal unfurled, allowing Will to loosen himself onto the bed. Yet, even after he had slid free he held Will closely, possessively.

Will tipped his head down to run his lips against the forearm wrapped over his collarbone before closing his eyes. *Never be free of it*, his mind began to tick over, again and again. It wasn't long until the words became a reality behind his closed eyelids. The thought of the arm tightening, wrapping around his throat and holding him still as the scalpel dug into his jugular, slicing neatly from side to side. It had him blinking his eyes open. *You've seen it, don't think he wouldn't.* And he had, so many times. Parts missing from the bodies on the slab through the skilful slip of a blade deep, deeper, *deepest*. Bodies and bodies piled in a reeking grave of another's making.

You see because you're the only one who can. He thought he might have caught a sob in his throat, quashing it before it managed to escape.

He was on the verge of fitful sleep, Hannibal's long, slow breathing hot against the back of his neck, when the doorbell rang. Will couldn't help but start at the sound. He felt conditioned to be fractious, despite the hazy aura of repose his body had forced on him, "Leave it," Hannibal said when Will made to move, "I refuse to believe it anything important enough to merit setting foot on the floor."

"I..." it rang again, twice in succession, and Will twisted in Hannibal's grasp, rolling over to stare at the ceiling; he must have looked more worried than he realised because he found a hand against his cheek, smoothing down to his throat.

"If I would not allow myself to hurt you," Hannibal said, "do you think I would allow others to do so?"

"Sometimes it isn't up to you," Will said, feeling a heavy sense of resignation pulling at him. *You killed him*. It was only fair that he be punished. He hadn't been able to hold onto himself. *Then they should take you both*. Will shook his head minutely, screwing his eyes shut. Of course they should, why was that even a question? Then...imagining for a split second *Hannibal's hands hauled behind him, handcuffed, watching him silently as they pulled him towards the door, Abigail looking on*

*quietly, her eyes...*And just who lets her walk free? She's just as guilty as you, as you are just as guilty as him. They would take her too. *And then the world begins to crumble, either way*.

"Stay here," Hannibal said when the bell rang again; it managed to sound aggressive, as if the person were thumping on it with a fist. Then a phone began to ring, vibrating somewhere in the room. Will went stiff with a sudden, crushing fear as Hannibal slid from the bed.

"Don't," was all he could say, holding the duvet in a tight grip as he watched Hannibal pull on a pair of loose brown trousers. He turned as he lifted a red lamb's wool jumper over his head, his eyes sparkling, a smile quirking the corner of his lips, as if that alone was enough to keep the wolves at bay.

"Death knocks. The FBI ring the doorbell."

Chapter End Notes

And yes I did just add the tag 'murder husbands'. Feel free to look forward to it as much as you like (or dare).

Nourriture Brut

Chapter Notes

Sorry again about the delay. I have been in and out of hospital again a lot this month. I hope this was worth the wait.

The section which takes place 'two weeks earlier' continues directly after the end of the last chapter.

Title translation:
"Nourriture (Food) Brut (Raw - i.e. emotionally)" - 'Raw Food'

‘I know who I am when I’m alone,
I’m someone else when I see you,
You don’t understand, you should never know,
How easy you are to need.

Don’t let me in with no intention to keep me,
Jesus Christ, don’t be kind to me,
Honey don’t feed me,
I will come back’

“It Will Come Back”, *Hozier*

“This is a god damned *disgrace*.”

An hour and a half so far, give or take a few painful minutes either way. That’s how long it had been, sitting back in his chair, arms folded, eyes trained on a small coffee spill in the middle of the table, while Purnell pulled them apart piece by piece. For once he was kicking himself for falling out of the loop that thrummed at the heart of the BAU, though he knew he wouldn’t have been any help to anyone over the last few weeks. Truthfully Will still wasn’t sure if he would be now, considering.

Jack to his right, Hannibal to his left, Purnell and her Department of Justice rep facing them, blazoned against sunlight bright windows; Will felt cocooned. Mildly warm and relaxed, even if he shouldn’t be. He took a drink of the lukewarm coffee he’d been toying with and grimaced at the taste.

The diatribe droned on. Will picked up his pen from the barely touched paper before him, twirling it in his fingers. The representative from the Department of Justice caught the action and gave him a hard stare. Will decided to hold it until it dissolved, feeling his skin itch as he did so, back into the malaise of tension and dislike. He felt confrontational and knew it would only make matters worse.

“We’re working towards closing one of the worst cases we’ve had come through the BAU, the worst to hit Maryland in decades, and now you’re telling me that you not only saw fit to re-open the Chesapeake Ripper’s file without informing the DA but you allowed *three* vicious killers to walk our streets?”

Our streets. Not *the* streets. Our. And ‘allowed’, that was another knife in the back right there. Purnell, for all that he detested her snobbish, inadequate, scrawny nature, knew how to spin her words. Will put the pen down and sighed as Jack answered, composed and yet taught. Crawford was a far better politician than he, which was why he’d been surprised when Jack had asked him to attend.

On the long car ride into town to the municipal building, Will had worried Jack was about to sacrifice him as a scapegoat. Now, listening as Crawford defended his position and the integrity of his unit, Will thought he might have misjudged. That, instead, Will had been brought in as Jack’s backup.

And Hannibal as Will’s.

There was a surprising lack of any further FBI support at their little get together. Or perhaps not, Will thought when he mulled over the past madness surrounding the Ripper which the BAU had been pulled into. Most were giving it a wide berth, unwilling to let the career ending brush of the Chesapeake Ripper case tar them as it had Crawford. And, considering the next set of unimpressed words out of the DoJ rep’s mouth, Will couldn’t truly blame them.

“To be honest? I feel as if you’re trying to blow this Chesapeake Ripper out of proportion so you can justify your, truthfully? Hasty and rash actions.”

Will smiled so broadly that he felt his eyes crinkle, lifting his hand to try his best to smooth it away, rubbing at his jaw while the DoJ rep stared at him as if he were rather distasteful. They’d moved on from the failures of the BAU straight to its biggest failing: the continued charade that was the Chesapeake Ripper case. Now, with the DoJ involved, the debacle was being taken to new heights. The Ripper always became so mundane and misunderstood in the mouths of others, Will thought. He became pedestrian, a nuisance, something others couldn’t or wouldn’t understand or believe. Will wondered why they had such trouble, considering some of the prolific serial killers their country had suffered under. He managed to temper his smile and drummed his fingers against the table.

“Oh that’s...” Will said tightly, looking to Jack, waiting for the nod; when Jack gave it Will knew why he had been brought along: justification.

“*Blown out of proportion*,” Will repeated as he turned back to the vultures on the other side of the table, “let’s take that phrase and see how it fits, shall we?”

“The last thing we need...” Purnell shook her head impatiently, holding up a hand.

“Two Jane Doe’s, one Annapolis, one Essex, chest cavities hollowed out. Four, no *five* John Doe’s in Baltimore in the past seven months with body parts removed. Jeremy Olmstead, I’m sure you’ve heard about him and his intimate introduction to his workshop’s tool box,” Will rolled on even as Purnell tried to interrupt, “Cassie Boyle and Marissa Schurr impaled, Andrew Caldwell split in two in a school bus, Michelle Vocalson painted with polyeurathane resin at the bottom of a lake, Carson Nahn with his tongue slipped out his throat, and, if I’m right, a slew of others we’re yet to find because we just didn’t understand how very *busy* he’s been,” two sets of hard eyes watched him

and Will felt the subtle sting of embarrassment, even under his righteousness. He was allowing himself to get riled up. Sitting back he took a long breath through his nose and fixed to DoJ rep with a stare, “That’s just for starters. What would you like for main course?”

“This isn’t a joke, Mr. Graham,” the DoJ rep bit out.

“Oh, I’m well aware, it’s not me you need to convince. It’s you two who are trying to turn this into a joke.”

“I think you’re the one being ridiculous here,” Purnell eventually scoffed, “you speak about him as if he’s an epidemic. He is a man, Graham, nothing more than a sick man who your department have let kill for far longer than he should have.”

“I think,” Will said with steady anger, “that ‘Chesapeake Ripper’ is a misnomer. I think he’s so much more than you’re willing to believe because even you can’t comprehend the ruthless efficiency he is capable of. The purpose behind what he does, and yet the lack of purpose behind his motive. I think that you would rather ignore the problem and hope that it miraculously decides to stop doing what it has been doing for decades. And I think,” Will said, hearing the deafening silence laid over the room like a blanket, “that is a rather unbelievable oversight.”

The arguments and counter-arguments circled and circled until Will felt dizzy with it. The room was hot despite the cold weather, catching the late November eastern sun at its brightest. Words were harsh but voices were soft. His mind drifted. By the time The DoJ rep asked the question he’d been listening out for, Will wasn’t sure he was entirely in the room any longer.

“One thing I’m unclear on,” the man was tall and bulky, body seeming misshapenly muscled through his neat suit, hair cropped in a military style to match the look, “is just why your other suspect,” he checked the report in front of him, running his finger down the paper, “Abigail Hobbs? Why her line of investigation was so suddenly dropped.”

“Because chasing the lame goose while the fox that lamed it creeps in the bushes is entirely futile.”

It was the first thing Hannibal had said since the meeting started. Will would have laughed, in fact he wasn’t sure that he entirely managed to halt the action considering Purnell stared at him disbelievingly. He turned to look at Hannibal, sitting to his left, looking entirely placid. The DoJ rep watched Lecter with narrowed eyes before opening his mouth. Will beat him to it.

“In other words he doesn’t think Abigail did it,” Will clarified, unable to keep the condescension from his tone.

“What are you, his interpreter?” the DoJ rep muttered.

“No,” Will smiled while his eyes stayed cold, letting them stray to Purnell, “he’s my minder.”

She looked like she was sucking on a particularly tart lemon.

“Alright, let’s not get sidetracked,” Jack sounded unenthusiastic; Will was sure he’d hear about it later. Right now, as Crawford continued to explain just where their investigation was going and how they planned to go about it, Will could concentrate on little else above the distance between himself and the man to his left.

The room seemed to have shrunk down. The light faded, the voices dimmed. The focus narrowed to their small corner of the table, chairs set side by side, barely two feet between them. His foot upon the floor sat slightly at an angle, almost enough that if he moved they would touch. The air between vibrated with a subtle tension, repelling as much as it attracted. Will almost forgot, for a blind moment, where he was.

Every word that had come out of his mouth had been true. The Ripper was a dangerous, narcissistic, cruel, compassionless murderer whom the FBI had sorely underestimated to its eternal shame.

Will Graham shifted his shoe until he felt it tap against another. Out the corner of his eye he allowed Hannibal's infinitesimal smile to make his heart tick faster.

(*Two weeks earlier*)

Agent Conrad was at the door.

Not Jack.

Hannibal had answered it, voice courteous as always.

Will had dressed in the room, unseen while they spoke.

He listened to the conversation from downstairs, standing in the open doorway to Hannibal's bedroom as he pulled on his brown Henley shirt and kept his eyes unfocused. Conrad's voice had floated upwards.

Matthew Brown's body had been found in Wyman Park, a stone's throw from Druid Hill park and the Maryland Zoo. It hadn't had the impact he'd expected. No blood rushing, no panicked fingers, no long, cold, dead stares. Not yet. Not until...

The world refocused, blur to blade. Will found Abigail standing across the landing, leaning in her own doorway. Will blinked, a building dread in his gut. *It's ugly Abigail. The ugliest of things.* A memory of his own voice, turning himself into a hypocrite. He had told her the truth, only now the truth was condemning him. Murder and all its entrails, dragged about his life like a tarred brush; stuck fast and impossible to prise off.

Will wished he'd been able to stay closer to the man he had wanted Abigail to see, and not the one Hannibal had whispered to. Once Hannibal had pulled her up like a rabbit out of a hat, rushing up from the dining table to grab him even as he still felt Matthew's flesh beneath his fingers, Will had felt as if the slope his life had tilted to a vertical cliff face. And now here she was, watching him over a space that seemed much more than the thirty feet it actually was, while voices downstairs spoke of the man whose life he had stolen.

Then, suddenly, an abrupt wave from a pale hand. A white flag or a peace offering? Will wished he was enough of a coward to simply step back into the room and close the door. It would be better for them both. He couldn't save her if she fell with him. The sound of footsteps on the stairs echoed. Will lifted his hand and waved back. Abigail smiled.

He kept Abigail's smile with him as they drove, tall buildings passing by like hunched watchers from stony cliffs. The silver sky shimmered through glass, dotted with rain. Conrad was silent. Will could feel Hannibal looking out of the opposite window, eyes trained on the outside world. Will felt as if they were a palindrome, from one side to the other. The thought made him unsure if he was truly himself or if he was melting into another.

The park was cold, all greys, dull greens and lingering patches of snow. It lacked the usual sounds of laughing children, walked dogs and jogging feet. Still and void, as if abandoned.

Will thought it unnecessarily cruel, to leave him like an offering so close to the zoo. So close to his father. Then he told himself that he should have expected it. Was a fool not to have expected it. This wasn't simply a public display.

It was punishment.

All he could see as he stared up at the body nailed to the tree in a brazen imitation of a crucifixion, hands run through with railway spikes, feet together and dripping with red, was punishment.

Punishment for a hubris Matthew Brown had tried to perpetrate, against both Hannibal and Will. A usurper laid bare for all to see.

His eyes took in the mutilation, the entire torso carved out to create a hollow in which three heads had been placed. A triptych of replication. The first a blonde head, withered and sad; Lehrwood's first kill, his missing wife whose body they were still to recover. The second Lehrwood himself, placed cheek to cheek with his partner. The third...Greg Fisher, his cheeks still plump despite the post mortem pooling of blood against his forehead and nose.

A warning. Pale imitations will not be tolerated. The Chesapeake Ripper stood upon the shoulders of those who strove under his philosophy. He was the one who took base and vicious death and propelled it above the lowly and the pedestrian, because he understood what it was to be without equal.

A vulgar imitation would not be entertained. Those who sought to replicate and failed were nothing more than rude.

Further, it was a punishment for Will. For Hannibal, Will was the one who had perpetrated the crime. The doubting, the anger, the cheating, the unwillingness to accept. He was the one who hadn't solved the sphinx's riddle in the allotted time. *If he had only seen it faster, would he still have..?*

The punishment was his doubt, because it was a barb placed that could only be removed by his own hand. A punishment that only he could lift. Hannibal hooked him, and Will suffered under the weight of it. He closed his eyes and felt small patters of rain flit against his face. A choice Hannibal had forced upon him. Stay in this mundane existence, living by ineffectual rules and surrounded by those who resent you, or...or be with the only one who understood him, and suffer the consequences.

Sink or swim.

He opened his eyes again. Look at it, he said to himself, *look* at it. This is what you have done.

The Chesapeake Ripper had taken Will's amateur murder and turned it into a powerful statement. A work of art. He felt simultaneously cold and elated at the mere thought, as if it were in some surreal reality in which only he and Hannibal existed. Standing before Matthew's corpse he had been aware that he was silent. Jack had cleared the scene, even before Price, Zeller and Beverly had arrived. Will had been glad. Once Beverly got here, well...

Let yourself go, the lips suggested cruelly, *relax. Don't you want to see the show?*

Calm, detached, objective. It's all I need to be. Will Graham took a deep breath of cold, wet air, closed his eyes and let the pendulum swing.

Once. Dark.

Twice. It was dark and lonesome.

The third time. When he opened his eyes he was no longer in Wyman park

The wind was still and the stars were out (Will remembered the sky had been clear that night). Beech Grove stood all around him, gloomy and malicious. The sort of place where no-one took a second glance, even if someone was seen carrying a suspiciously large bag over their shoulder. Because Hannibal would never have been foolish enough to drive all the way into the industrial estate, to have his tyre prints left at the scene of the murder...if anyone ever traced the murder back there at all.

Matthew was heavy but Hannibal was strong, powerful.

"The feel of dead flesh does not disgust me, but I wrap him regardless. Wrap him tight like a present, ready to be undone later."

The gravel beneath his shoes crunched and skittered. The car wouldn't have been far away (the Bentley? Surely not. Will wondered, now that Hannibal no longer had the tow truck, what he used). Parked close, but not too close. Body slid in, boot closed, pedal down. Nice and safe, driving by the book, calm and assured. Will thought he could see Hannibal behind the wheel, if he concentrated hard enough. Maroon eyes trained upon the road, hands in their leather gloves relaxed on the wheel, checking the rear view mirror and then...

...suddenly eyes focused on him and Hannibal smiled.

"It's not often we get to do something together, is it Will?"

Eyes open, breath sucked in and Will found himself panting, panicked, stepping backwards without knowing where to put his feet. He barely looked at Matthew Brown's corpse, mocking him with its open mouth as if it laughed at his panic until he stumbled from the scene. His hands found a low, stone wall beside a rose garden where he leaned forwards and hung his head. Acrid and bitter, his mouth tasted of bile. He spat into the flower bed and tried to calm his breathing.

"Perhaps this was unwise."

Pushing up from the wall, Will coughed into his hand. He looked up at Hannibal standing to his left. The man was observing the roses, tipping his head as if to catch just the right light upon the petals. Behind him Will could see Jack striding towards them, frown in place. Will had no time to

answer other than to avoid Hannibal's eyes and brace himself. His hands shook and he clenched them to fists, keeping them at his sides. He was secretly glad when Hannibal did not leave.

"What the hell is going on?" Jack asked, no nonsense.

"I...I-I know him," Will choked out; he'd been worried he'd have to feign surprise but here, now, facing Matthew's dead eyes and almost unrecognisable corpse, he found he didn't have to.

"You know him," Jack repeated levelly, rubbing at his mouth and shaking his head; he paused for a moment or two, staring at the corpse upon the tree, before he spoke again, "Christ, this is getting to be a habit with you Graham. Get him the hell out of here," he said tersely to Hannibal, gesturing sharply towards their cavalcade of parked cars by the central fountain, "I'm going to have the body brought back to the lab. Think you can do a positive ID?"

"Y-yes," Will nodded jerkily, clearing his throat.

Hands and skin and tight, tight, tight before the mouth choked open and one word squeezed its way past fingers and nails and fury fuelled determination.

Stop

Time wriggled and twisted, as if he could be back there. The thought process was so removed, so different. He wasn't sure he could comprehend how he had felt in that moment, nor replicate it.

The coroner stood by the tree as a tentative agent removed the first spike, causing the entire aesthetic to crumple. Matthew's arm slumped, his body folded and the heads popped from the chest cavity like peas from a pod. *Thump, thump, thump.* They rolled at the feet of the other agents who stepped back with instinctual disgust.

A muttered '*jesus, not how I planned my morning*', replied to by another, less green faced agent, '*This is nothing. My dad was a butcher. You should have seen the crap he was showing me from eight years old. They hollow pigs out the same way.*'

Would it be the same? With his hands around the hilt of a knife, embedded deep into living flesh, tissue separating, dissected, open to the chill air in plumes of smokey steam, organs and meat and entrails removed like a pig being gutted by the butcher for...

For what.

For *what*.

They hollow pigs out the same way.

A blind, stabbing understanding began to bubble beneath his thoughts. Will stared at the grass below his feet, barely hearing the background voices as his mind rushed off without him

What does he do with the organs? You say he took trophies? His own voice, demanding an answer of Purnell as he had sat across the table with the smell of cologne in his nostrils and hand tight around his walking stick. He watched as Matthew was lowered to the ground, like a pig taken down from its drying hook, *The Ripper doesn't take trophies he takes body parts. And what does he do with them?*

Dear sweet Christ it's not...

A festoon of blood and seasoning.

Will stared at the coroner as he picked up the first head with gloved hands, tipping it into a bag which rustled and swung with the added weight.

Three at a time, he'd thought, three little pigs for the slaughter knife. A significant number, a ritualistic need. The Ripper always killed in threes, it was reliable. That's what narcissistic serial killers liked: *reliable rituals*. Then the last one, four dead. He'd thought it an escalation, pushed by Abel Gideon rather than any real need to kill a fourth. It hadn't. Oh god, it hadn't been...

What for? The bodies had been frozen, killed who knows how long before they were found. Emptied out of useful pieces, bits and appetisers.

Prime cuts.

It had been because Hannibal Lecter had prepared a feast not long after the missing reports for the last sounder were filed, Caldwell, Vocalson, the two found in the warehouse Huntley and Ward. Wait, he thought, it had been the day before Bressinden had been found.

A lightning strike, multi-limbed as it shot through and illuminated, creating threads he wished he couldn't see. In a sudden flush Will saw, as if in a tapestry before his eyes, a family tree of organs and flesh and their origination. There had been five. Five because he was catering for more guests.

-*The dishes were of a wide variety but with a connecting thread. Each built up a living picture of an animal as the courses were streamed in on white coated arms.*-

He remembered how the tongue had tasted in his mouth, smooth and delicate in flavour, as it sat on top of the lungs and the spleen and the blood sausage. Remembered the eyes upon him as he ate, watching his every reaction.

Hannibal Lecter seeking out appreciation for a dish that held far more preparation than simply cooking and serving.

David Bressinden's lying tongue as a gift wrapped in cracked paper, given with a silent understanding that one day he might know its significance, or remain a blind pig along with all the others.

"Will?" he did not start, did not feel surprise, even as he turned to find Beverly at his arm; he could see Price and Zeller walking towards the scene, pulling on their gloves, movement behind them and zigzagging feet over crime scene trails, "I think you'd better sit down. You don't look..."

"He's dead," he said steadily, looking around him to find Hannibal gone; he eventually spotted him by the Bentley, slipping inside to drive it closer and save Will the walk. I must look like shit, he thought, "he killed him."

"Oh my god..." Beverly's voice drifted off as she looked over to find what was left of Matthew Brown being loaded onto a stretcher, "I don't..." she took a moment to collect herself, reigning in her surprise and replacing it with a tight hand on his shoulder and stiff support, "shit, Will I'm so sorry."

"Don't be."

“What..?” he found her sharp eyes on him, unable to meet them.

“Carnivores,” Will said, for once not having to mimic being upset; he felt cold and couldn’t stop the shivering in his limbs, “they eat each other.”

“Will...”

“Do you know that shark foetuses cannibalise each other in utero? Vying to be the only one of their kind,” he turned and looked at her, swallowing, “the Ripper’s taken to eliminating the competition.”

“Competition,” Beverly repeated, even though Will was sure it hadn’t been what she wanted to say or ask. She looked suddenly tired and fraught. Will was at least used to producing that sort of reaction in people, it made it easier, “I’m not enjoying this cryptic crap right now. Just come and speak to...”

“You’ll be able to match the finger marks at Mr. Fisher’s throat to Matthew’s hands,” he said practically, “he...I think Matthew killed him, and the Ripper he’s...displaying other artists.”

“You...” Beverly stared at him for a few seconds, before shaking her head, hands at her hips; she let out a derisive sigh, “god, this is-this is crazy even for you. I hope you’re wrong about this, I really am.”

Finally Hannibal returned to lead him away. Will felt as if he was leaving behind a part of himself at the scene. As if Hannibal was abducting him right in front of everyone’s eyes and no one was lifting a finger to help. He stared at Lecter as the man opened the door for him, imagined the soft hand at his arm to keep him steady. When Hannibal slid into the driver’s seat the shadow of the raindrops on the windscreen spattered dark spots across his face. Will saw them for what they were.

Blood no one else could see.

They were alone in this microcosm, shrunk down to nothing more than the bubble Will remembered once being happy inside. Separate and concise and utterly isolating.

The panic rose and rose until Will clicked his seatbelt closed, took two deep breaths as Hannibal pulled out and drove carefully from the park, then pasted on a dry smile and kept his eyes blank. When he spoke he knew he sounded as calm as if they were simply going for a Sunday drive.

“So?” he asked, glad his voice did not waver.

“Beg pardon?”

“How did I do?”

Lecter checked his rear view mirror before signalling out onto the road. He did not speak again until they were driving smoothly towards Quantico. Lecter’s answer allowed his shoulders to relax.

“It was a beautiful performance. I’ll admit you had me fooled.”

“Well I’ll take that as a complement,” Will said, his facade taking on a bitter tint; he tried his best to dampen it, “I was thinking numb acceptance for the ID at the morgue. It’s what Jack will expect.”

“No doubt. I have noticed you bite your fingernails when you are stressed and upset. Perhaps it would add a little validity.”

“You’re the expert,” Will murmured, smirking as he closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the headrest.

The *festoon of blood and seasoning* danced behind his eyelids. It taunted him with every meal he’d been served by Hannibal Lecter’s skilled hands. *Sausage and bacon and steaks and curries and stews and brains and lungs and...*Will kept his lips closed and pretended to sleep. That way he could ignore the scream clawing to escape.

The landscape had barely changed over the past few weeks, as he’d driven back and forth between town and his ship on the sea. Dusty sunshine and frozen ground, patches of snow and brown and grey. Then, with a suddenness that seemed appropriate, a snowstorm blew in with the announcement of a date for Matthew Brown’s funeral. The world became a twee Christmas card, lumps of snow in waves, enough that he had to dig away a foot or so from his doorway before it would even open. Abigail helped him while Hannibal sorted through the items he had brought, the boot of his car letting out a pale glow into the oncoming night.

The dogs were doing circles in the living room, he could see them through the window, barking, whining. He kept his eyes on Abigail, smiling until she finally cracked. The stoic face she’d been wearing since they were reunited finally shone through with missing humanity, her lips quirked. Lenny jumped up at the window, his paws flailing against the glass, his tongue lolling. Abigail laughed and Will didn’t think he’d ever heard anything so fragile.

It was noticeable that when Hannibal approached her laughter faded. She would not meet his eye. Will hurried them inside before he lost his nerve.

“Miss me? Huh?” Will had Winston by the ruff with both hands, smiling, scrunching the fur in his fingers as the dog attempted to lick his face happily.

“Reliable creatures,” Hannibal commented, cocking his head as he watched them both.

Will couldn’t help but feel something in him crack. He wished that Hannibal wasn’t capable of affecting him with such simple words. Or perhaps just not be so unintentionally, analytically cruel.

“Oh, hey, *haha*, ok, I haven’t got anything for you,” Abigail was saying as Sascha and Lenny mobbed her, lady and Buster dancing at her heels, “I’ll go check on Frank and the little ones.”

“Thanks sweetheart. We’re going to take the others for a walk,” Will declared, standing up to a riot of dogs all scampering for the door; the word ‘walk’ was well recognised.

“We are?” Hannibal looked neither put out nor pleased.

“Yes.”

“I would have thought the weather precluded walking. Unless we plan to dig our way through?”

“It’s not that bad. I have spare boots, jeans. Save you getting wet.”

“I can change on our return,” Hannibal said as he watched Will dig about for a ball and stuff it in his pocket, “I must admit I see clearly what you get out of this, though I cannot fathom what is in it for me.”

By the door, Will hesitated before looking over his shoulder. The smile was partly forced, partly in humour. He could hear Abigail cooing and laughing over the pups in the next room, their excited, high pitched yaps too cheerful a background for the words that came out of this mouth.

“I’ll let you make me dinner.”

And there it was, in its purest, undiluted form; *understanding*. It came with a thrill of excitement which shouldn’t have existed, heavy guilt and a strange sense of calm thrown in for good measure. Will’s loaded statement hung in the air like a heady perfume; it made him sick to smell it, though it seemed to intoxicate Hannibal, if the sheen in his eyes was anything to go by. He appeared to be unable to keep his eyes upon Will, shifting them away to the nearest dog, Sasha, tail wagging.

“Let me,” Hannibal said as if trying the words on to see how they fit.

“Mmm. Now come on, before it gets too dark.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Hannibal said, sounding like a child on Christmas Eve, “the darker the better.”

The walk was difficult, just as Hannibal had predicted. They stuck to the trees where the snow was sparser on the ground. The dogs delighted in leaping into the drifts, disappearing into the snow only to emerge covered in white. The stars came out as the clouds drifted off. The chill was complete. Will found himself standing amidst the snow, grey in the fading light, staring back at the house through the trees.

His ship glowed like a welcoming fire. Will felt Hannibal beside him, a silent presence. They stood and watched as the last of the sun fell below the horizon and the darkness folded down like a thick blanket, covering everything. A strong, gloved hand slipped into his.

“Allow me to find our way back.”

It sent a shiver up his spine, even as he gripped the hand tighter.

Will opened the door to a puppy gambolling past his feet, paws flailing as it tried its best imitation of a run. Winston was the first in, sniffing at the pup and wagging his tail. Abigail rushed into the room, hair a mess and eyes alight with an electric joy. Will stepped in between the dogs, as they shook themselves and padded about, and scooped the puppy up.

“Tanner, should have known,” he muttered, “where exactly was it you thought you were going?”

“I really don’t know how you tell them apart,” Abigail said, offering her hands.

Will handed him over as Hannibal hung up their coats, “I’ve got dry things in the chest of drawers by the bed. Think some of them might fit,” Hannibal observed them both, eyes seeming to take in every small detail, before he turned and left the room, trailing Winston and Buster; Will turned back to Abigail, “Tanner has a white stripe on his nose,” he said as he poked the pup, “Luck has three brown spots down her chest, Chico a white tip on his tail, Adams is just black and white and...honestly I have a hard time with the other three.”

“Where do you get these names?” she asked, shaking her head.

“Never seen the Magnificent Seven?”

“Nope.”

“Well that’s just a crime. Pretty sure I’ve got it next door.”

“Well, until I do, I think puppy is a good enough name for them just now,” Abigail laughed as Tanner squirmed in her hold. She looked young and carefree. Will wasn’t sure if he was relieved or horrified at the prospect of Abigail’s sudden rejuvenation considering everything she had endured, “are you going to keep any?”

“I...I don’t know,” Will said, trying to keep the chill from his voice; Matthew had asked the same thing, “Do me a favour? We’re going to get dinner started, could you feed the mob?”

“Sure,” she said, cuddling Tanner while the pup licked at her chin.

“Thanks,” he squeezed her shoulder, unable to give more than that.

When Will walked into the kitchen he found Hannibal standing by the counter looking almost unrecognisably casual. A pair of Will’s soft, grey cotton sweatpants upon his legs, just a little too short for him, and a red-brown jumper that was baggy on Will but fit nicely to Hannibal’s larger frame. Will walked up beside him as he set about finding the implements he needed from Will’s stock to complement those he had brought. Will put his hands on the counter and watched as everything was systematised, like a ritual before a slaughter.

Dinner became an exercise in control. Will and Hannibal worked in relative compatibility while Abigail sat in the next room, fishing her way through his film collection. The hamper Hannibal had brought was unloaded, herbs and vegetables and glass jars hand labelled .

And a large greaseproof paper packet tied elegantly with fat string. Will glanced at it twice, his mind racing. *The lips grinned*. He rolled up his sleeves and washed his hands, drying them roughly. Without warning Hannibal took hold of his right hand and placed a wide bladed knife into the palm, wrapping his fingers around the smooth, metal hilt. Will licked his lips and swallowed. His mouth was dry.

“The carrots are pennies, the apples and leeks are strips. I will also require a sauce.”

“What am I making?”

“Roast black treacle pork, with apple cider jus and caraway creamed carrots.”

“I doubt anything like that has ever passed through my oven.”

Hannibal was unable to stop his eyes skipping to the parcel, “There is a first time for everything.”

Will swallowed down the bile in his throat.

“Do you wish to know the best cut for a roast? On a pig, here,” Hannibal, without warning, pulled up the left side of his jumper and took Will’s right hand and its knife, pressing the blade into the flesh of his side just below the ribs until it dented the skin, “to here,” he let the knife trail his body until it hit his hip. Will stared, unable to suppress a swift inhale.

“How similar we are,” he said, voice monotone, unable to take his eyes from the knife; Hannibal dropped his jumper and Will blinked, as if a spell had been broken.

“This was a very Nietzschean pig,” Hannibal said as he undid the string and unwrapped the paper, revealing a layer of fat without skin, a curved wave of heavy pink meat and white bone beneath, “trials of his wild existence find their way into the flavour of the flesh.”

“Old experiences,” Will said as he scrubbed carrots over the sink, “disguised as new ones. Am I steaming these?”

“Please,” Hannibal said as he pulled out a small saucepan with a lip, “Old and new are relative terms. We consume and subsume. The past always skews our view of the present.”

“You think I will absorb this experience, let it change me...” slicing the carrots was almost effortless, the knife was incredibly sharp, “then we are all Nietzschean pigs in that regard.”

“Yet some of us are wise enough to know the animal must sometimes break free and go back to the wilderness.”

“Regression,” Will mused, placing the vegetables and fruit in the steamer. He took the wooden spoon when handed it, “it makes us tastier.”

Hannibal raised his eyebrows, seeming momentarily inspirited, before tipping his head in consideration.

“It allows us to accept all that has gone before, and consequently all that will come.”

Yet Hannibal had left no room for the opposite. The outcome of being unable to accept. Not being able to forgive. Hannibal’s world left only one road open, slowly closing all those he found undesirable. Will stared at the only road left, fogged and unknown. Holding his breath, he forced himself to keep walking.

“I remember...” Will hesitated while Hannibal spooned black treacle into the pan, the long dribble wriggling as it hit the warming metal, “...you watched me. In the cabin. Stood and watched me. What was in the syringe?”

“Anti-biotics,” Hannibal said, blatantly, “the first of seven.”

“Seven?” Will frowned, “How did you manage..?”

“I did not. If I had your illness would have had a very good chance of being cured.”

“Defeating the purpose?”

“With or without me, Will, I doubt your purpose will ever be defeated by something so mundane.”

“This is going to burn,” Will said, unable to keep up the conversation.

“Butter,” Hannibal said, cutting two large cubes and dropping them into the pot, “it gives the treacle a chance to soften.”

“Anything else I should know?” he asked ambiguously.

A ripe plum was selected from the bushel of fruit Hannibal had brought, squashy and dark. Will watched as Hannibal opened a small, felt pouch, casually removing a scalpel with which he began to peel it. Will blinked rapidly, looked down to his pot, stirring mechanically, and then...

“I assure you, it is the best method for my purpose,” Hannibal looked amused as Will laughed, loud and wide and unabashedly.

“Oh god, it’s just...” he shook his head, his laugh stuttering down to quick bursts, making his shoulders shake, “you push sometimes, you really push don’t you.”

“We need only the skin, nothing else. Too much flesh in the sauce and it will become sweet. I require only richness.”

“Don’t be obtuse,” Will said as Hannibal added the thin peel of skin.

“I do not make a habit of it.”

“And how do we know when it’s too sweet?”

A finger was his answer, dipping into the soft, black sauce to scoop up a syrupy mass and, without hesitation, smear itself across the side of Will’s neck. He hissed, stiffening, his eyes closing as Hannibal leaned in to latch his lips to the warmed skin. He stood, rigid, feeling the hand with the scalpel held at his shoulder, keeping him still. His pulse raced against Hannibal’s mouth as he sucked harshly with the hard pressure of a tongue. Will felt a little off balance by the time Hannibal leaned back.

“Just right,” he was told, and nothing further.

Around the table, with a trio of faces facing a trio of plates identically bedecked, Will forced himself to watch Abigail take her first mouthful. He saw himself in her, as he had been before he knew about the beast sitting at the table with them. Oblivious, wounded and marred, but trusting. Trusting him. Guilt prickled along his arms, down his back, in his throat; *you allow her to stay in this mad ploy*. Yet when he speared a strip of meat, cooked to perfection, and placed it in his mouth, it was Hannibal’s stare that he caught. Watching him as he chewed, face calm but eyes still trailing an odd sort of resignation.

“Too dry?” Hannibal enquired.

“No,” he said, shaking his head and taking a large sip of red wine, “delicious. As always.”

Smelling of quinces, not yet fallen from the tree, a bitter but sweet taste that was ninety percent smell, he remembered Doctor Halloren’s words, *then one sense was being outdone by the other even as he continued to believe the taste was all in his mouth and not his nose,and he remembered the fruit as an ideal more than a reality, the farm where he and dad had stopped on their way to South Carolina and worked for the day and he’d eaten as much as he’d picked, and the senses were important because without them he wouldn’t have known, would never have known, what had happened because he could not see, could not see a thing with his pupils rolled back into their sockets and Hannibal’s hands over his mouth*, *he screamed and screamed and choked on the dusty pills in his mouth, marring the sweet taste, the pleasant taste, the taste of home, and then the meat, the meat of an unknown pig in his mouth, the taste of despair and the smell of fresh blood, running until it blackened, and the smell of hot skin against his mouth and nose as he struggled and*

struggled and was forced to swallow, and endure the crisp sting of a needle under the flesh of his arm as he faded and faded upon the bed with its musty floral pattern and the vague scent of Hannibal's cologne cloying as a taste to usurp the quinces and the joy they held inside their skins...

Bolting awake; Will would have said he did. No flailing limbs or shouts. Just laboured breathing and wide eyes, fluttering with an inability to understand why he could not see through the darkness. Then a voice, a sickeningly familiar voice.

"Will, are you alright?"

He fought with the hand that touched his shoulder, scrabbling to have it taken from him, taken *away* from him, fighting so hard that it only attracted the other hand. Then the moonlight from the window illuminated Hannibal as he leaned over him, trying to calm his hysterical hands, and the memory and the dream and the present slid over each other with a nasty symmetry.

Will panicked, pulling down his right hand before lashing out with a high, fizzing ecstasy in the movement. The back of his hand connected sharply with Hannibal's face, the sound and the impact seeming to wake him from his stupor. Will stared, breathing stuck in his throat, at the sight of Hannibal's face turned away in the darkness, only a pale sliver still visible. When he returned his face to the front Will wasn't sure what to say.

There was a long silence, long enough to become entirely inscrutable. Unknown. *Damn you,* Will wished he could shout, *how could you? How could you do this to me?*

Instead he reached up with a shaky hand, running his fingers tenderly over the heated flesh of his jaw and cheek where the strike had caused the blood to rush. A moment later Hannibal's hand joined his, sliding over to hold his hand in place, eyes closing softly.

"I would not expect forgiveness to come so easily," was all Hannibal said, before Will pulled him back down to the bed.

He fell asleep in Hannibal's arms, unsure if he would ever be capable of such absolution.

"You know, you're just full of surprises, aren't you."

Will wondered, as he walked into the interview room and sat down, just which surprise Jack was referring to. He had so many in store, after all. He pulled down his rumpled jacket sleeve and folded his hands on the desk. A new suit jacket, neat and well cut. Something a little more. It had been a conscious decision to trim back his undesirable nature, to an extent, and become something more acceptable.

At least on the outside.

He looked around the room as Jack set up. It had been a while since he'd been in any of the small, grey interview rooms on the third floor with their sinister one way mirrors. After Bressinden, that had been the last. It reminded him of the room at the Asylum, with Chilton at his front and Matthew Brown at his back, wrists trapped to the solid chair beneath him. The thought was not conducive to calm. He expelled it.

At least, he thought, this time he had a friendly face across the table.

“They’re letting you interview me?”

“I’d say no one else wanted to,” Jack sighed, “but I’m pretty sure we’d have lots of volunteers. Sure they’re a few agents around here that’d like to see you crack.”

“Right. What exactly is it I’m supposed to be cracking over?”

“We’re going to go through this, step by step, and you’re going to give me everything because this is damned serious, Graham, and *fuck me* if you don’t seem to go out of your way to make my life a living hell.”

“Good thing you haven’t pressed record yet,” Will observed, frowning at the digital recorder to his left.

“And no wise cracks, or I might just join the ranks on the other side.”

“Fair enough.”

“Alright, we’ll start small,” Jack said, purposefully condescending as he pressed record, “Interview with Will Graham in relation to case number 3894 dash 2, Special Agent Jack Crawford at six fifteen on the second of November twenty fifteen. So, we'll begin at the base level. What was your relation to Matthew Brown?”

“We were sleeping together.”

A pleasant, bright, fleeting moment of absolute satisfaction on seeing Jack do a double take. At first he had nodded at the reply, looking down at the desk, before his eyes sprang back up. Will waited for the obvious denial, a repeat of the threat against wisecracks, but to Crawford’s credit neither came. Instead Jack took a deep breath, letting it out slowly, before carrying on.

“I’d ask how you met but, considering his place of employment, I think I can guess. Alright, forget this, let’s cut to the chase. You know why you’re here.”

“His handprints match Fisher,” Will said with certainty.

“You knew,” Jack shook his head, “you knew who he was?”

“I suspected.”

“Funny,” Jack said tightly, “this is the first I’m hearing of it.”

“It wasn’t exactly a fleshed out theory,” Will tried to rationalise, “all I had were a couple of hunches and a pretty shaky lead.”

“Sounds like you had a hell of a lot. Christ Will, I’ve seen you have people arrested for less.”

“I only followed up on them the day before he was found,” Will explained harshly, “and I doubt they’d have convinced you. Some unexplained animal deaths years ago at his father’s zoo and the fact that he was pretty damn morbid,” he left out the severe beating of the man at the gas station and Matthew’s disturbing fascination with sexual violence, “Would you have hauled him in?”

“When was the last time you saw him alive?” Jack moved on quickly, unimpressed.

“Three days ago. We...we had a fight.”

“Physical?”

“No.”

“About?”

“Someone else,” Will said vaguely; Jack did another impression of a startled deer. Will sighed, “is this one of those surprises that you were looking for?”

“That you have a complex social life? Actually yeah,” Jack said, “Who was this someone else?”

“I don’t know,” he lied quickly.

“Come on, don’t pull that crap.”

“I don’t. It wasn’t exactly the only reason we fought,” he added, desperate to steer the conversation away from Lecter.

“Oh?”

“He was angry that I didn’t appreciate...” Will swallowed and licked his lips, “appreciate everything he’d done for me.”

“Done for-? No...” Jack started, seeing where he was going.

“Everything he’d done, Jack,” Will talked over him.

“We don’t know that yet.”

“For god’s sakes Jack, Greg Fisher looked liked me. He *looked* like me. It was classic transference, Fisher was a surrogate. It’s just like Hobbs all over again, but this time I was with him, I *knew* him Jack, and I didn’t see what he was until it was too *god damned* late!”

He looked away as he sat back, hand to his mouth and elbow against the arm of his chair. The argument made him feel weak at the thought of how true it was, and worse for how true it *still* was. Because shouting at Jack about his feelings of utter helplessness in the face of true horror was all the relief he had. *Because Hannibal was still untouchable, and Will wasn’t sure if he truly wished that was the case or not.*

“Is that what you wanted to hear?”

“Honestly, I don’t think there’s anything you could say that’ll make this situation less of a disaster,” Jack sighed, shaking his head.

“I didn’t do this Jack, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“Got a good alibi this time?”

“I was at Doctor Lecter’s.”

“All night?” Jack frowned.

“Yeah,” Will tried to sound casual, “I had a few drinks, couldn’t drive home. He let me use the guest room.”

“Anyone else see you?”

Will hesitated, long enough that Jack narrowed his eyes and repeated the question.

“Abigail Hobbs,” he said eventually, avoiding Jack’s eye, “she...she’s come home. She was there.”

“Eventful night,” Jack said, deadpan.

“I guess it was,” he said vaguely, “Are we done?”

“Yeah, yeah we’re done,” Jack said, nodding and raising his brows, sitting back in his chair, “you know the drill. No sudden disappearances from the state, no speaking to the god damned press. We’ll get this checked out.”

“Thanks Jack.”

“Don’t thank me just yet.”

Three days later, the street lamps seemed dull in the misting rain. Will hoped, as he hurried, hood drawn up and eyes scattered suspiciously across the empty street, that Jack’s threat about the ‘god damned press’ didn’t stretch this far.

“Where the hell have you been?”

The bar wasn’t run down but it was trying its hardest. Gloomy and empty, it had a miserable air. The music was low and muffled, and the man behind the bar was busy scratching his name onto the back of a Zippo lighter. There was a low level stink of cigarette smoke, despite no one smoking, as if it were a permanent resident in the furniture.

He found Freddie Lounds sitting in a shabby booth behind the pool tables, dressed in an eye watering yellow mac and red boots. Will felt inconspicuous by comparison. He sat down, pushed his hood back and checked the door. When no one followed he licked his lips and started to speak.

“Look, I don’t have to...”

“No, you listen to *me*,” Freddie interrupted.

And, despite his best intentions, Will listened. Then wished that he hadn’t, because Freddie had a lot to say. Later, when he thought it over, he would have thought Freddie would have held onto the photographs for longer. Pulled them out as an ace up her sleeve When Will didn’t do as she wanted. Instead, she showed her hand like a gambler who knew they’d won before the cards had even been dealt.

Three, A4 sized reprints were tossed towards him. Will looked down with a frown, quickly turning to tight shock. On top sat a surprisingly clear shot, considering it appeared to have been taken through a window, between a set of nearly closed curtains. The further two were more direct, would perhaps be the most delicate way Will had of describing them.

Naked skin, tight fingers, legs splayed against sheets, necks thrown back. Two people utterly embroiled in the other, completely oblivious to the camera trapping them.

Will picked them up, tapped them together on their long edge and them placed the pile face down on the sticky table. He was sure, from the slight blink of worry in Freddie's eyes, that he looked just a silently murderous as he felt. There was a chill at his neck, as he felt the last of his assets slipping away from him, leaving him washed up and bone dry.

"Want me to tell you what this is?" she asked.

"It's fucking illegal, is what it is," Will said darkly.

"No, let me tell you *exactly* what this is. This is me proving to you that I'm not here to be taken for a fucking ride by you, Graham."

"What the hell are you talking about?" he bit out.

"You know, I should have know it was some sort of set up. I really should have. But there's always the lure of a story and, for once, I was going to give you the benefit of the doubt. Gonna give you a chance and you screwed it up."

Will stayed silent, watching as Freddie smiled tightly. It didn't reach her eyes.

"Because I checked up on your little *deal*, and surprise, surprise it's no goddamn way legit. Offering me the Ripper like a carrot before a donkey? You must have thought me a perfect little fool."

"That's not..." Will tried to interrupt.

"But I know something's up, because I look through Lecter's downtown mansion and, oh, what's that? There's nothing there, nothing suspicious, nothing out of the ordinary. Just the usual rich bachelor paraphernalia and a number for a shrink, which I'll admit I found kind of amusing. No great shakes, but then why were you sending me after him, considering you two are so, how should I put it? *Close*.

"So I check out your claim about exclusive rights, and wow, it's bullshit. What a shock. No rights for Freddie, just a breaking and entering charge if she was caught and probably no backup from her partner in crime, I'm guessing. So I keep tabs on you, Graham, because I don't take kindly to being toyed with, and what do I find? Oh," she laughed shortly, reaching over to tap her fingers on the face down photographs, "I find something better than a false promise."

"Freddie..."

"Because I don't give a shit who you're fucking, unless you're fucking *me* over. I honestly don't know what you think you're doing, whether you just wanted me to check up on your millionaire boyfriend or if you really think he's got some dirty skeletons in his closet, but I'm not for sale without a good price. And my price is information."

"So much for integrity of the press," Will managed to grind out, face stony.

"Did you really think I'd trust you? Are you that insane that you'd think I would forget all the things I know about you? All the threats you've levelled at me? All the vilifying articles I've

written on you? That we could just shake hands and put all that behind us? Because if you do then you're a bigger fool than I thought possible," she leaned forwards, arms crossed and resting on the table, "I don't trust you, I don't like you and I sure as hell don't take orders from you."

"You're making a mistake, Freddie."

"No, I think you'll find it's you who's made the mistake. I have copies, of course. Lots of really good shots," she said lasciviously, smiling, "you two really know how to put on a show."

Will laced his fingers together to keep them from reaching across the table and doing something he'd regret. His mind was racing, trying to predict what would come. He came up blank. *Stop panicking*, he told himself.

"What do you want?"

"Cutting to the chase, I like that. Makes things so much easier, right? What I want is what you can *actually* get me, instead of what you *say* you can get me. I want exclusive details of crime scenes investigated by the BAU, names, dates, places, times, photographs, the works."

"You must be kidding," Will swallowed, wishing he could take his words back as soon as he'd said them; stupid Graham, he thought, *stupid*. Yet the shock of his situation was still settling in, making him feel numb.

"Do I look as if I'm in a kidding mood? I want you to be my little eye in Quantico and, in return, I *won't* send these photos to Jack Crawford's email. Or internal affairs. Or, who knows, post them up on the break room cork board. Because I'm guessing that the little affair you two have going on is probably counter to policy, and would mess with the integrity of all your cases from since Lecter showed up on the scene until now. In fact who's to say you two weren't at it before then? Didn't he okay you for active duty? Wow," she said with feigned amazement, "imagine it was found out that the only reason you were able to get that temp badge in the first place was because you were fucking the psychiatrist that stamped your sheet."

The bar was silent but for the radio and the sound of a slot machine in the corner whirling and playing its three second ditties, lights flashing. Will stayed very still, avoiding Freddie's blatant stare. There was nothing he could say. Nothing. He swallowed and stayed quiet. After a few moments Freddie sat back, looking entirely satisfied.

"This recent corpse, Matthew Brown right? Worked up at Baltimore asylum. And guess what? That's all I've got so far. Couldn't get any good shots and the cops are wise to me at the scenes now. How about you rectify that? We can start with him."

"I can't just..."

"I'm sure you'll think of something, Graham," Freddie said as she stood up, smiling down at him cosily, "how does it go? Necessity is the mother of invention."

She made to leave but Will reached out, almost involuntarily, and grabbed her arm. She made to struggle free but Will wasn't going anywhere. When he curled his fingers tighter, digging in through her mac to squeeze her bicep, she stopped moving. She kept her eyes straight ahead as if hoping that, if she didn't look at him, he wouldn't do whatever crazy thing she feared he might.

The only ace Will seemed to have left was his unpredictability.

“You said you found a name,” Will said quietly, “of his shrink.”

“Wow,” Freddie shook her head, looking genuinely disconcerted, “you really have a hard neck, don’t you?”

“It’s the least you could do.”

“No, I think it’s the least you could do to not think I’m that damned easy. I know, how about we see how this little arrangement goes and, if I’m feeling particularly generous I might think about throwing you a bone. Goodbye, Will.”

The photographs found themselves folded messily into an offset square by careful fingers before being shoved unceremoniously into Will’s inner pocket. He sat for a good few minutes after she’d gone, in the half broken quiet. Hands were lifted, rubbing over his jaw, down to cover his mouth. He closed his eyes. After a quick internal debate, Will stood up and walked to the bar.

“I’ll have a scotch,” he said to the pale faced barman, “no, actually make it a double.”

He knew it was a bad sign. By this point Will was beyond caring.

“I suppose it would be easier if you simply tell me.”

Hannibal’s office seemed odd from this angle. New; lying on the chaise lounge, staring up at the Georgian ceiling with its clean angles and minimalist decoration gave his a different perspective which he was sure shouldn’t make him feel as displaced as it did. He was used to the stage set as seen from his habitual chair, of Hannibal across from him, legs crossed, the vast library as a back drop. Or peering down from the balcony at the man below, moving back and forth with purpose. Or even vice versa from time to time. Not like this. The sun painted odd shapes on the ceiling. It would have been almost refreshing, if he hadn’t felt so calmly cynical.

The last of the evening light streamed in through the tall windows, cutting vivid strips into the cream paint in bright gold. Yet the wind howled outside, causing the windows to occasionally rattle in their frames. Winter was setting in early, and the late November gales had taken on a frozen touch.

He was glad Hannibal had waited until now to start quizzing him. After he’d called from the bar, muttering into his phone and asking resentfully for a ride home, Hannibal had been his usual, accommodating self. His office had been closest, and Lecter had said he had some papers to collect. They had stopped by and found out just how accommodating Hannibal was willing to be. Even so far as to not question Will when he’d taken him by the shoulders once they’d walked through the door and kissed him, a little sloppily. Things had escalated quickly. Will was sure it was down to the fact that he wasn’t completely drunk. He had the feeling that if he had been Hannibal wouldn’t have entertained his whims.

Now, laying here, Will felt oddly centred compared to the last two hours of steady, hazy panic he’d been trying to suppress.

He rolled his head and looked at the antique clock on the wall, delicate pendulum swinging back and forth. Three thirty three. A sense of surprise flitted through him. It was today, wasn’t it? Will thought. The last few minutes of Matthew Brown’s funeral had already passed. Will looked back to

the ceiling, wondering how much the black ranks of mourners had been uncomfortable standing at the graveside of a murderer, or whether the tears that they shed were untainted.

He had never met any of Matthew's friends. Barely met his father. He wondered how many people were left standing around his grave.

'*You want the truth? Sometimes I think you might be the only real thing I got in my life. There, is that enough?*'

Will licked his lips and shivered, hiding his pained look beneath his hands before rubbing roughly at his face. Matthew's voice echoed out into the room and Will had to work to keep his breathing calm. The cold did not seem to come only from the air. He could feel it against his chest, where his shirt still lay half opened. Against his legs and feet, the small of his back. He stretched, feeling the strain in his muscles, and then turned onto his side, the sunlight at his back warming him slightly.

Hannibal was standing beside his desk. Even with his shirt hastily tucked into his trousers and his feet bare he looked utterly collected. He was leaning against his fingertips, pressed to the wood, hair delightfully mussed even after running his fingers through it. His eyes were trained down on the report lying there.

Will realised that Lecter had been speaking to him and frowned.

"Sorry," he ground out, clearing his throat, "what did you say?"

"I asked you to tell me what happened."

"Tell you? You want me to talk about that night," Will said, as if tasting the words to test them; they tasted careless. He had already decided it would be rather suicidal to tell Hannibal about Freddie, for himself and Freddie both. He could only imagine...no, Will thought, actually he couldn't imagine what Hannibal would do. It was mildly terrifying to even approach the thought. Instead Will had decided that he would blame his midday alcoholism on Matthew Brown, and hope that Hannibal bought it. In his zeal to stay away from the problem, Will's hasty tongue ran away with him, "a show and tell?"

"You wish for an exchange?" Hannibal did not turn but Will could tell his eyes were aiming for him, falling onto the floor beneath the chaise longue.

"If I tell, you show."

"Perhaps that is a little...premature."

"Mmm. Maybe you're right," Will watched Hannibal with barely concealed intensity, *for destruction and affection both*. He could not push too soon, or everything might fall apart before it had even begun. As it had already begun to.

"Then..." Hannibal said, turning to Will and taking an inordinate amount of time running his eyes over his body, laid out on his furniture in merely a half open shirt and nothing else. Lecter paused long enough for Will to become a little uncomfortable under the scrutiny, as if Lecter were committing the sight to memory, "...before we take things any further, perhaps we could make sense of all this."

“Is there any sense to be made?” Will asked, closing his eyes; he was tired, so tired, and yet the blood in his veins seemed to fizz, keeping his limbs and brain from settling.

“Sense can be seen as arbitrary,” Hannibal said, picking up a sheet of paper and studying it with a clinically appreciative eye, “and yet it creates a solid framework. Without it the chaos would subsume and make light of everything we are trying to build,” he put the paper down and turned, eventually walking over slowly to join Will. Sitting down with his back to Will’s abdomen, Will curled forwards instinctually around the heat. Hannibal ran his hand through Will’s still sweat damp hair and down across the back of his neck.

“Maybe I’m not ready for sense just yet.”

“You do not wish to face what you have accomplished?”

“A little late for that,” Will frowned, “I watched him. I looked into his eyes as he died and I think I can still see them when I close mine. So don’t accuse me of hiding. It’s the last thing I’m capable of anymore.”

“I wish you would temper it.”

“Hiding?”

“I seem to recall your growing enthusiasm for exhibitionism,” Hannibal took his right hand and placed it against the chaise longue behind Will’s back, leaning on it as he brought up his left to stroke absently down Will’s bare calf, “I must say, as entertaining as it is to watch, I cannot approve.”

“You think I’m drawing them a map?” Will asked, closing his eyes, “I’m not that cruel.”

“I think we must be careful, and at this moment I fear you are incapable of being careful.”

“Not incapable,” Will qualified, “just reckless. I suppose transitions always leave me vulnerable to recklessness.”

“Were you reckless when you killed Matthew Brown?”

Will managed to hesitate only for a few seconds. He hoped it wasn’t obvious, even as he unconsciously curled closer to Hannibal and shivered.

“I was angry.”

“And afterwards.”

“Angry for a whole other reason.”

“Oh?”

“You.”

“May I ask why?”

“Don’t start this again,” Will opened his eyes and gave Hannibal a sidelong stare, “you can get away with the naive act for Jack and Alana. Please don’t use it on me. It’s just insulting.”

“Apologies,” Hannibal smiled, leaning down to place a soft kiss against Will’s temple, drawing in a deep breath as he leaned back.

The wind picked up, sending the tree in the lane outside rustling with the sound of cascading water, the light in the room flickering as the curtains shivered. Will pushed himself up on his right arm until he sat beside Hannibal, legs still outstretched. He rested against the man’s right side, chin on his shoulder, cheek pressed against cheek.

Closing his eyes only brought images unbidden to the silent theatre of his mind; *Matthew Brown, face red, eyes bulging, lips sprayed with saliva as he choked; his pale face and mutilated body; his hands on Will’s dragging them up to his neck, smile thin and shark-like, mouth moving, “Don’t you want to, baby? Don’t you want to put your hands on me?”*

He was a bad man, he argued dryly against the guilt that rose, *you stopped him before he started in earnest.* And you became the bad man to do it, *it argued back.*

When he fazed back he realised his hand had climbed up across Hannibal’s shirt, his fingertips stroking gently at his Adam’s apple. The hand at his calf had gone still. Another gale shook the room, making the foundations seem weak. Will slowly curled his fingertips until the nails touched flesh, digging in.

“You have fantasised about it,” Hannibal’s voice was rich with barely contained curiosity, “killing me.”

“Yes,” he answered without hesitation. It was almost startling, both the honesty and the ease with which he gave it. *Don’t let him fool you*, the lips cautioned. Will swallowed.

“How would you do it?” Hannibal asked quietly, “How would you kill me?”

“With my hands,” Will said as he leaned back far enough to look down at Hannibal’s throat; he uncurled his fingernails and rubbed tenderly at the abused skin. With his top button undone the scabbed cut at Lecter’s throat was visible beneath his collar. Will remembered the sight and smell of blood, and how close he had come to ending this nightmare instead of allowing it to continue.

The thought rushed at him, the memory of wondering *what it would be like to fight with Lecter over the man’s life*. Yet in every fantasy, every nightmare, Hannibal had never raised a hand to defend himself. He had simply watched Will with a tender affection, a slight smile upon his face, and stayed silent as the knife slipped in or the rope tightened or the hands closed around his throat. Will felt suddenly cold at the thought of the words resting behind his teeth. He said them, regardless, “I would use my hands.”

“And here I thought we were working towards forgiveness,” Hannibal sounded so genuinely amused, despite the threat of death, that Will couldn’t help but react.

“I don’t want to kill you anymore Hannibal,” Will said with a wry twist to his lips, “not now that I finally find you so interesting.”

“Then what is it that you want?”

“An admission. For you to stop lying to me. I prefer sins of omission, if anything has to be given at all.”

“Then I will endeavour to stop.”

“Meaning that you did before, although I think you might not be lying to me now,” Will raised his eyebrows marginally, “it’s not often I expect the truth from you.”

“There’s a first time for everything,” Hannibal seemed to be suppressing a smile, his lips pursing and his throat swallowing attractively; the phrase was purposefully inflammatory, he knew it was. *Thinking of meat between his teeth, chewing with a mechanical efficiency underlined by a morbid curiosity.*

“Telling the truth and sex in your office,” Will let out a short, cynical sigh, looking about the room at his discarded clothes, “I guess it’s a day of firsts.”

“Rather freeing, is it not?”

“The truth or sex in your office?”

“Will,” Hannibal admonished, with a subtle severity which made Will shiver.

“Yes, alright,” he cleared his throat and tried to stay calm, “It is. I suppose...it’s different. I’ve never been happy with the truth. It’s something I’ve learned to change to make people happy, to be economical with. I’ve never had this before. Someone who lets the truth be what it is.”

“We’re the only ones who understand, Will.”

Fingers stopped their ritual movement. He looked at Hannibal with a curious and yet expectant stare. Hannibal’s eyes flicked quickly up and down, between Will’s eyes and his mouth. Eventually he swallowed and looked towards the window, the bright light reflected in his eyes.

“We are the only ones who understand what this feels like. It makes us unique.”

“It makes us alone, together,” Will said, dropping his hand to the soft material on which he sat, “is that what you want?” he asked as if he were simply musing.

“I wanted only for you to realise your own potential for possibility,” Hannibal said, once more looking Will in the eye, “with all my knowledge and intrusion, I could never entirely predict you. I can feed the caterpillar, and I can whisper through the chrysalis, but what hatches follows its own nature,” knuckles traced gently down Will’s cheek before disappearing as Hannibal stood, “and is beyond me.”

The words sparked something Will was sure Hannibal would not appreciate. Rage, sheer and sudden. His hands tightened to fists, his jaw clenched, and flashes of memory ran skipping through his mind’s eye. Hannibal watching him like a rather interesting research paper, Hannibal plotting with Sutcliffe to keep his illness from him, Hannibal forcing pills down his throat while he screamed for help that would not come.

He thought about getting dressed, leaving, not looking back. It was a sudden and visceral idea. He knew the alcohol still hot in blood wasn’t helping matters. *Nothing stopping you*, the lips at his ear said. It appeared they had no allegiance except to themselves. Hannibal meant nothing to them. He felt absurdly calm and more the foolish for it. *All that he’s done to you and you lay beneath him and smile*. Not just smile, Will thought as he curled up, bringing his knees to his chest and trying to stay balanced.

He thought of Abigail as he'd seen her last, sitting in Hannibal's garden the day before last in her puffy jacket, staring at the stone wall. Will had been wary of leaving her alone for too long. Sometimes he tried to rationalise it by claiming she would surely be lonely after running for so long. When he was being more truthful with himself he looked closer and saw she didn't seem to have the haunted look of one who had run only to return. He began to suspect that she had never truly left.

Somehow her eyes seemed to plead with him, even as her mouth stayed shut. She had the look of one who desperately wanted her life to return, *a mother and father and daughter and a house for them all*, just as much as she wished to escape the facsimile of that life which she now had stitched to her, Will and Hannibal akin to patches to cover up the holes.

The garden had been cold and Will had made cocoa. He had called her name but she hadn't turned, just answered,

"*The orioles never came back.*"

It had frozen his hand on the doorframe. He hadn't known whether to step out or retreat. She sat like Cassandra upon the wall, spouting omens no one would heed. When Hannibal's hand slid over his own Will hadn't the strength to resist him. He had leaned back against the man, a strong presence, and allowed Hannibal to command them both with his smooth voice and underlying promise of refuge.

"*I have made drop scones,*" he had said, the other hand coming to rest on Will's shoulder, "*they are best hot with honey. Come inside, Abigail."*

And she had. They both had. Will hadn't known how he stood by and watched the strings draw tighter and tighter between them until they were in too much of a tangle to undo. If he'd even wanted to undo them.

"We can't be selfish," Will said, laying his head down gently on the arm of the chaise longue, "there's no room for it any longer."

"Human beings are capable of little else but selfishness," Hannibal rebutted, "we are subjective creatures, always looking from an original angle. Unaware of those around us."

"No connection, no true understanding. Then in this world love and hate do not exist."

"They exist," Hannibal said, tipping his head to the right, "they are rare sparks, and difficult to differentiate. No one can be fully aware of another human being unless we love them. By that love we see potential in our beloved. Through that love we allow our beloved to see their potential. Expressing that love," Hannibal turned to look at him, "our beloved's potential comes true."

"Then I wonder why you even keep me around," Will smirked painfully.

"Now who is being obtuse?" Hannibal smiled, "Every shadow has its double. The light splits them."

"You can't have shadows in the dark."

"That is how it feels to you?"

“It doesn’t to you? I’m alone there,” the precipice of the abyss surrounded him, towering cliffs blotting out the light from above, “Alone in that darkness.”

“You’re not alone, Will,” Hannibal said as Will closed his eyes and drifted, “I am standing right beside you.”

Décision Éclair

Chapter Notes

> Décision Éclair - 'The Blink Moment' : having already made a decision without conscious thought of making that decision
>
> So, nearly a year since the last installment. Sorry this took such a long time to come back to. I hope this isn't too black a chapter to return on. Thank you to those who pestered me for updates, it gave me the impetus to keep writing this chapter. I found this quite hard to continue, which will probably make sense by the time you reach the end.
>
> Will has been having doubts about his endgame.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You don’t have to go back,” Abigail said.

“I do,” Will replied, “This is going to make the most sense to them. And it’s the safest place to be; when the world makes sense no one’s looking too closely.”

“They let you go. They wanted you to go. That doesn’t make any sense.”

“I know. I'm sorry I can't explain it better. Jack will start sniffing again if he isn't kept happy.”

“No. It’s not...not going to make any difference.”

There was a wish there, in her tone and her stare, a want to keep him from harm as well as a want to keep the status quo; all hiding a greater truth. That she wanted back the life she’d lost. Will sat next to Abigail on the hope chest at the bottom of her bed and sighed. To his left he could see the bookcase which had held the blood stained page, to his right the doorway that the truth had walked through and wrapped him in its arms.

An embrace of death, one that could only allow him to be reborn.

For Abigail Hobbs he was sure this was all like a bad dream. Ever since that phone call snuck through into her house, Hannibal’s voice asking for her father, she surely felt as if she were walking underwater. Will wanted to ask her but couldn’t bring himself to be that cruel. He couldn’t bring himself to validate his life through a girl he felt he’d wronged.

“I know that things aren’t what you need,” he said as she pushed her long fall of dark hair behind her ear in a familiar motion, “but I want you to remember something for me, ok?”

“What?”

“We both care about you, a heck of a lot.”

“Maybe caring isn’t what I need anymore.”

It was a saggy thought, heavy with a weight all of its own, tired and hopeless. Will stood up and swallowed because he didn’t know what else to do. Explaining this situation to himself? Doable. Explaining it to her? Non-negotiable.

“You don’t understand,” she said as he kept his silence, searching for words he couldn’t find, “he won’t let us lie to ourselves anymore.”

“Who’s been lying?” Will asked, looking at her over his shoulder.

“We both have,” her words tied themselves to him, weighing him down, “there’s a place for us here.”

“Abigail...”

“Please don’t...”

“I just,” Will took a long breath and savoured the silence before the words tripped off his tongue, “wish you didn’t understand.”

“Well I do,” she said with a girlish, half-smile, one that made his world ache for an innocence shattered, “and I suppose that’s all we have now. The three of us.”

“I suppose it is,” he said.

“Then I guess you have to go back.”

“I do,” he hesitated, then walked over to put his hand on her head, running it down to her shoulder and gripping it reassuringly; as he reached the door he turned to look at her, sitting like a doll in her doll house, *kept*, “thanks kiddo.”

The smile she gave was just as fanciful. Will knew they were all living on borrowed time. He hoped, from the bottom of his heart, he could spare her life being torn apart all over again. To that end he was willing to play the sacrifice.

The hallway was cold and white, hiding shadows in its corners. It made him think of an empty meat locker. Standing at the head of it felt like a recurring nightmare. Walking down it felt even more dangerous than that. *He half expected to see open doors to his right and his left as he descended, showcasing horrors from his past.*

He half expected to turn into the small room with the grey stripe and the chair with Velcro straps and be greeted by sharp brown eyes and a soft drawl.

“Hey Will, what kept’cha?”

Instead the only familiar face he passed was that of the cell watchman who’d shown him to Wells when he’d visited the man, still alive and kicking. The face did not regard him, eyes staring down at the floor as they passed each other. Their footsteps, loud against the polished floor, said hello.

The avoidance told him all he needed to know. It was as if a switch somewhere had been flipped, something noticeable like a change of temperature.

Something made him wonder if everyone could feel it in their presence when he passed. Maybe smell it in the air. There had to be something, didn't there? Cause and effect, no change without consequence.

But then he thought of Hannibal, secure in his domain. A man who still walked freely among them despite the shadow he cast and the bloodied footstep he left behind.

As he knocked and was admitted by a stone faced secretary, Will Graham wondered how long it would be before the walls tumbled down and the curtain fell. When all saw what he saw. How much longer before he could no longer keep the mask in place. Or perhaps, how much longer until he would no longer need to.

Peering into the open door of the admin offices as he made his way to Chilton's office door showed the audit boys from the Fraud Department hard at work, surrounded by stacks of files, bags of shredded documents and cold cups of coffee. The sight couldn't fail to make him smile.

Chilton was moving around his office like a beetle on a hot plate when Will entered, taking a seat to ease his legs. Watching the man in any form of agitation was something Will found tiring. Like seeing a tiny animal caught in a trap, squealing to get free. It seemed Chilton was too distracted greet him properly, though it was difficult to miss the sudden pulling of the file folder on his desk closed when Will leaned forwards to peer into it.

"Interrupting something, am I?" Will asked as he sat back.

"If you don't mind, I'm rather busy," Chilton said tightly, "I'm sure you'll take the appropriate offence if I tell you that you're the last person I'm interested in dealing with right now."

"I can imagine the authorities in any form are making you mite twitchy, Frederick. What with the investigation into your employment practices."

"Can I help you with something?" Chilton asked with barely contained ire, each word separate and pronounced.

From his coat pocket Will pulled a folded document, a little crumpled at the top edge. He slipped it onto Chilton's desk, with the man's fidgety hands picking it up quickly and unfolding it.

"What is..?" Chilton puffed out a breath, shaking his head, "You can't expect me to sign this."

"I expect you to sign it *and* date it."

Chilton's face soured, "You haven't yet completed your psychological evaluation and, from what I have seen, you are *far* from the picture of mental health. You may think of me as those parasites currently dismantling my filing system do, but I'll have you know I'm not willing to jeopardise what I have left *for you*."

The wide smile Will displayed at the words seemed to have the desired effect. Chilton stood up a little straighter and licked at his lips, holding the official document in both hands before him as if it were some sort of shield.

“You know, Matthew liked to talk about work,” Will said casually, looking around Chilton’s grand office; *the overtly showy furniture, all mahogany and oak, diplomas and PHDs on the walls, expensive and intellectual works lining the shelves*, “you hear interesting stories from loose lips. Is it true you hired him the day of his interview even though he didn’t officially start until two weeks later? It’s funny, he didn’t even remember having to go through any sort of criminal records check before you handed him his uniform and told him where you kept the keys.”

A twitch ran through Chilton’s face like a crack in stone, splintering and muttering over his lips, and up into his nostrils to flare angrily. When he spoke Will thought he sounded like taught piano wire being wound tighter and tighter. *What would it look like when it snapped?* He wondered, *All coiled and ruined*.

“I would have thought you above blackmail,” Chilton smiled flatly, “it seems I should never go back on my gut instincts. You’re as much a lowlife as the rest of them.”

“You don’t have any instincts Frederick. And don’t worry, I’m sure my pride can take the accusation. Now would you sign it, then I’m sure I can show myself out.”

A heavy, lacquered black pen was snatched up from the desk and jammed across the paper before, it seemed, Chilton could either talk himself out of it or tear the thing in half. It was thrown back onto the table with a glare and Will stood to retrieve the abused sheet, squinting against the sunlight that sneaked in through the heavy curtains.

“You know, Graham,” Chilton said as he stood, one arm on his desk, the other at his hip, “I have to admit I’m glad.”

“And why is that?” Will asked as he looked at the document in his hands.

“Because you might be gloating now, but I have one thing. One thing that I know I can cherish. That I’ll have front row seats for your inevitable fuck up,” Chilton’s closed-lip smile turned nasty and true, “you must think you’re quite the little spider in the web. Feeling us feeble flies tug on the strings. It’s a shame, in a way, that you can’t see the shadow of the bigger spider behind you. I suppose the only thing I regret is that I’ll miss my opportunity to study that fine brain of yours.”

“I do so love empty threats,” Will said as he turned to leave.

“Give my regards to Hannibal, won’t you,” Chilton called to him as he left, his voice raising as Will kept walking, “he’s been such an indispensible insight, after all!”

Will didn’t feel the need to tell Chilton that he was well aware of the bigger spider, as he so put it. It was just easier to take when you knew that you were on the same web, hunting the same flies.

“I’d say welcome back,” Jack said as he looked down at the manila folder in his hands, containing Chilton’s savage signature, “but I don’t think I ever really counted you gone.”

“Nice to know I wasn’t even missed.”

Though Will would consider himself a fool if he didn’t count the way in which Jack gripped the card, and the way he watched Will walk across his office when he thought he wasn’t looking, as

sure signs that he was not yet once more completely trusted.

“Dr Lecter confirmed your alibi for Brown’s time of death. Luckily for you,” Jack added, “I’m counting Brown’s murder as another tally on the Ripper’s report card. Thoughts?”

Hands in his pockets was the easiest way to make sure they didn’t betray him. Will blinked and kept his breathing even before answering. The air in the room seemed thick. It may have been the heady sunlight, or even just the warmth of the air. Still, he thought that there was a dream-like quality to it. If he closed his eyes, he was sure he could believe himself asleep.

“That’s a good choice,” he said after a pause, “Though I’m sure it won’t turn out to be that simple.”

“And why’s that?” Jack asked tiredly.

“Because I’m pretty sure that the Ripper didn’t take all of the heads in the mosaic he left us. Lehrwood’s wife was his own sin, and Greg Fisher belongs to Matthew Brown. I know what he wants to tell us with his latest display.”

“That he still rules the roost,” Jack nodded.

“Not just that,” Will said, shifting until the glass on the picture frames shone his own reflection back at him; it could have been the shadows behind him, or a trick of the light, yet the fractured shape seemed to crack behind his well combed hair; *antlers in the shadows,* “it was a message. There are no substitutes. Just because he didn’t kill them all, Jack, it doesn’t mean he wasn’t involved.”

“You think he knew them? All of them?”

“All but Fisher,” Will said, “but he was responsible for his death nonetheless.”

“You’re sure sticking by this, aren’t you? You know I’d do anything to tally more murders to that bastard but I can’t help feeling you’re just making things fit,” Jack said with a long sigh, rubbing at his right eye as he sat back in his chair.

“Things only fit when they’re right, Jack.”

Sitting back in his chair Jack took a moment to observe him and then stood, walking around his desk to lean against it, facing Will. Will kept his eyes on the painting and blinked to wet his dry eyes.

“He was involved. Hobbs, Budish, Wells. He knows where to find the human mirrors. Narcissistic sadist, right? Of what little we know, we know that much about him. He wants the ones that mirror his beauty. The ones that are flawed eventually show their cracks and are disposed of. He’s looking for the one that won’t shatter under the pressure.”

“Let me get this straight, you think he’s *lonely?*” Jack puffed out with a laugh.

“Wouldn’t you be?” Will asked, turning to look at Jack for the first time since he’d entered his office.

“If I were a sadistic psychopath? Not from my experience, no.”

“Maybe it’s not as simple as him just being a psychopath.”

“Meaning?”

It was necessary to ask, wasn’t it? Will thought that it might be necessary for his sanity to ask. To be sure. Jack had always thrown his all into this investigation, willing to use people as he travelled, destroy all in the name of justice. Having him say it now felt as if it would vindicate his own need to see this through. *Do what needed to be done.*

“How far are you willing to go Jack, for this?” Will asked seriously, “How much are you willing to sacrifice?”

Jack’s mouth was smiling, though his eyes were hard as stones, “Enough,” he replied, “far enough.”

“And if you don’t like what you find?”

“Then I guess I’ll have to live with that.”

“Ok,” Will took a deep breath and held it before letting it out in a rush and looking down at his feet, “ok.”

The silence wasn’t awkward, but it was noticeable. Will wished it wasn’t. *You wish a lot of things, don’t you?* he asked himself.

“And my trip to the crime scene? My examining of Matthew’s body?” Will asked as he looked up at Jack’s commendations glittering on the wall.

“Left off of the report, for now if you don’t mind,” Jack said, sitting down at his desk, “you know better than most about the bloodhound in the Inspector General’s office. No need to give them a scent.”

“You know best Jack.”

It was simple to lie, because he knew that there would be a time where he didn’t need to any longer. There was anticipation there, the sort that itched at your fingers and made your nights restless.

An expectation of his becoming.

Change was always uncertain. Will knew that, and he was sure Hannibal revelled in the fact. There were shadows in which the future hid, and Will knew better than to point the flashlight in their direction. No need to ruin the surprise.

“Well it’s good to know you haven’t lost your intuition,” Jack said, with the barest hint of sarcasm.

“Sure Jack,” Will said, staring at the antlers, “sure.”

“Until then we’ve got another problem to worry about. Have to keep up appearances, don’t we.”

“Oh?” Will asked, looking over as Jack stood, silhouetted against the large window behind him like a cut out, “I suppose there’s no rest for the wicked.”

“Real cute, Graham. It’s a strange one, this case,” Jack said with a humourless smile, “aughta be right up your alley.”

The stables smelled soft, like warm hay on cold air. The chill of snow had yet to touch him but he felt it, nipping at his skin. When he opened the report in his gloved hands, it gave him what it was supposed to give.

Like a heartbeat pumping blood to the brain. If he closed his eyes he knew he would see it. Part of him wondered what he was doing here: *your despoiled, or perhaps this has been spoiled for you*. The thought of knowing, truly knowing, tainted the feel like ink on blotting paper, slowly spreading out and out until it touched everything it could reach. A true understanding that linked them together far tighter than mere imagination ever could.

In the place where a killer had stood, Will Graham closed his eyes and let the pendulum swing.

I don't want you to see me. I don't want you to see what I do.

Because seeing meant defiling the finished product, the artistry that filled every crack and crevice, every fold and vein. The beauty come to claim the madness. The horse would have been calm because she had no need not to be.

There's so much comfort in darkness.

Should it make you smile to know that it's true? Maybe he thought that way as he carried her to her new life. Her heavy body in his arms. You know the feeling. A corpse has a unique weight, and the legs and arms cause a sway in the walk, a stagger to the feet.

I took your life and then tried to give it back to you.

Is that what you want to do? Perhaps that's what this is. You wanted to take my life and give me a new one. A new life where we could both exist, instead of the old life, the previous life, where one of us would have to be subtracted.

The black glossiness of the horse's eye, dead and staring, watched him with familiarity.

Do you remember the moment you saw it, and what it meant that you refused to know?

That sleepwalking night on Hannibal's floorboards, as the stag's eye had warned him and he, as prey, had ignored it willingly.

Will? Open your eyes.

When he did he took a deep breath, as if drawing his first. There were words on his tongue, coming out of his mouth before he had really noticed the thought of them.

"This was a coffin birth."

He knew Jack stood to his left, and that the gaze was strict in his brown eyes even though his face was neutral. The words had left a bitter taste on his tongue and Will bit at it, swallowed, tried to lick it away. *This one's delusion isn't fully realised*, he thought. This one's ideals are confused.

He knew the eyes had moved from him but the feeling was still there. He felt the need to explain everything he did.

“Decomposition builds up gases...” he began, “inside the putrefying body which forced the dead foetus out of its mother’s corpse. It’s really more of a prolapse than a birth. Whoever did this *knew* the horse. Knew she was dying. That she’d already lost a life. He knew Sarah Kraber. Was familiar with the stables, knew who would be where and when so he wouldn’t get caught, which means he works here or, uh, used to work here? He has medical knowledge of animals but he’s not a veterinarian. He...” the words were light, as if he was reaching out for something floating on the air around them, a truth the scene had left behind to be tasted, “he considers himself a healer.”

“How is *this* healing?” Jack asked .

“Sarah Kraber was reborn. This wasn’t murder, Jack. This was grief.”

Grief. Can it be let go through such violent animalism? Perhaps grief never leaves. Perhaps the scars never allow us to forget that the past was real.

Will heard Jack turn and move away with a name already on his mind.

“We have a suspect. Peter Bernadone, up at Hoarfell Ranch. Might fit your bill.”

Will nodded even as he continued to stare at the bloodstained hay kept tightly within the wood tall walls. Even as they drove through the bright white landscape the image stayed with him. A bloodied floor within a hiding box.

It’s only right that he’s dead, Will thought as he stared at the world moving quickly by outside. *It’s only right that you took his life. You know what he would have become if he’d kept going, if you’d let him go.*

You know what he’ll become if you let him go.

Drifting away into his thoughts as if he were travelling a river, deep and dark. Things hid beneath the surface, vague shapes moving below the water. As the SUV bumped over the jumpy ground of the dirt track Will’s mind was with the fishes and their prey.

“What are you thinking?” Jack asked suddenly; Jack had been doing things suddenly for a while now, as if catching Will off guard would snap him into speaking the truth.

“Mmm? Not anything helpful.”

“Does this guy, this Bernadone, does he fit you think?”

“I don’t know yet. Wait till we’ve spoken then I’ll let you know.”

“You’ve become very demanding, you know that?” Jack snorted, thought he was smiling, “We’re here, this is it.”

And inside the room of cages he found another kept in a cage. Peter Bernadone looked like a skittish bird and Will felt that they were the prowling predators creeping in around him. When he spoke it was jolting, wary, and Will couldn’t help but see that the man was afraid of him.

It felt strange to imagine that. *Not imagining the fear of another projected onto a killer in his mind*. Fear, true fear that he might do harm. It was...odd. Unusual was perhaps a better word. As Jack introduced them and Peter finally looked at the picture of the victim, Will clicked.

“You get your head injury while working at the stables, Peter?” he asked, frowning.

“Yeah was kicked, kicked by a horse. There,” he said pointing to the hairless strip above his right ear, “Boom.”

“That’s an atypical motor response,” Will explained for Jack, instinctively softening his voice, *because the feeling of being fearful itched at his skin and he knew he didn’t want it from this man who was already so full of mistrust, “*Peter’s ability to look and touch can only happen in separate events.”

As Will touched his gloved finger to the cage sitting at his feet and the rabbit within stood on its hind legs to sniff at him, he wondered what it would be like. *That fear*, *when used correctly. Were there correct and incorrect applications of fear?*

“It’s aggravated by stress, right?” Will asked.

“Are you feeling under stress?” Jack asked as he folded his hands; Will noted Jack had followed his lead and was speaking in a low, quiet tone.

“Yeah I’m worried about the bird,” Peter said, “worried about the bird. I’m sad for-sad for the horse but I can only...only help the bird.”

If he were to think of himself as a predator, to use those instincts to heighten the way in which he hunted, then he would know that Peter Bernadone was no killer. And thus he knew Peter Bernadone was no killer. He was a healer, alright, but not the killer they were looking for.

Because the man they were looking for wasn’t anywhere near as sure of their goal as Peter was. Will looked around him at the animals here, all kept safe and cared for, *nice and small and secure little bubble floating in the soup of the wide world outside.*

“Thank you, that’s all we need just now,” Jack said.

“I’ll let you know,” Will said as he half turned to leave, “about the bird.”

“Alright,” Peter said with momentary hesitation, and there was nothing more than that.

Outside seemed like a big, open nightmare compared to the singular, small salvation Bernadone had built for himself. Out here anything could happen. Out here was where the monsters played. Will wondered as to his own haven, down where the strays gambolled and the driveway was as a long arm pushing the highway back. The two places seemed to overlap, like tracings on acetate; he wondered if there was a meaning behind coincidences like these.

His logical mind said no, but his imagination liked to think there was.

“You know you shouldn’t have promised anything,” Jack said as they walked back to the SUV, shoes crunching in the snow.

“I didn’t promise,” Will shrugged, “you don’t have to promise to do something just to get it done.”

“And if he’s our killer?”

“I’d still let him know the bird was ok.”

“Hell, that wasn’t what I meant Will.”

“Oh. Well honestly? He did work at the stables and he has knowledge of animal care, but I don’t think he’s our man. If he is he didn’t mean to do it, but...but if he isn’t then I think he knows who is.”

“Then we have a foothold,” Jack said, stopping to turn and look at him.

Will took another few steps before turning back and returning the stare. Feelings of things lost, that was what hovered there, around them like a shroud. He raised his brows in question. In return Jack smiled and looked down. It was like creased leather in an old couch. Will wished he could feel as at ease in the presence of that smile as he’d used to.

“You know it seems kinda redundant, but this is...let’s just call it therapeutic.”

“If I’m going to be your therapist then you’ll have to pay me extra.”

“I don’t want you to ask me how I felt about my mother, but you’re good for the soul in this work Will. I guess I’d forgotten how much more simple you make things when you're not like a high strung cat clawing at an imaginary door. This feels like the old days.”

“I can be complicated if you want.”

“Thanks but no thanks,” Jack said as he started walking again, Will joining him, “I’m sure I’ve had enough of your unique forms of complication.”

Will didn’t have the heart to tell Jack that, by inviting him back, he’d put his foot into the mine field. Every step was a risk not worth taking.

“I thought you might like to sit down.”

It was a feeble excuse, Will thought, as he leaned against Hannibal’s desk and looked at the upside down drawing in ink of a towering cathedral. It was only partly constructed, the framework like a scaffold. Pieces were shaded in scratching lines and before the building a small plaza had been placed where a fountain splashed. A slice of a city somewhere far from them.

He was sure that’s how Hannibal had seen him before all the lies had risen to the surface and burst; an exotic thing far from him. Something he wanted to snag and pull closer. The closer something got the clearer it became. Something he could pull so close that they would merge into one. Something familiar.

“You want me to resume my therapy, doctor?” Will asked as he tilted his head to give another angle to the sketch.

“Would you like to resume your therapy?”

“Such crude methods. Are you really going to start throwing my questions back at me?”

“Not at all,” Hannibal said as he put the ink pen into a stainless steel holder to his right and looked up at him, eyes bright and clear, “I am merely curious,” Hannibal picked up his desk clock and

turned it to face Will before observing his sketch critically, “You came here at seven o’clock.”

“My old time slot, huh?” Will thought as he looked at the accusatory clock, “Maybe it’s force of habit.”

“You are a creature of habit, much like myself.”

“Do you learn new habits?”

“I find old habits in new places,” Lecter said tipping his head and twitching his lips, picking up his pen once more, “that could be called discovery, though I would rather think of it as unearthing.”

“Grave digging,” Will said as he pushed up to walk around and finally see the sketch the right way up.

There was a pause in which the only sound was the scratch of the pen on the paper and the soft hum of a tune Will half recognised from the stereo system Hannibal had dotted around his house. When the tune stopped Will flicked his eyes to the sliver of Lecter’s face he could see from this angle. The light from the windows seemed to distort it.

“I thought I’d better wait until your new client vacated the building.”

“Ah, the young Miss Verger. I should introduce you. She is delightful.”

“I’m sensing tragedy,” Will said, forcing the hollowness from his tone.

“Oh?”

“You’re too interested.”

“Will, you wound me. In fact it is the most intriguing tale of botched fratricide. Miss Verger is sitting in a bird cage while the cat prowls outside.”

“So why does she come to you?”

The small smile on Hannibal’s lips made Will react in a dichotomous fashion; the hairs rose on the nape of his neck, while simultaneously he felt a need to open his mouth and ask.

Just ask. Instead he waited and knew he was a coward for it.

“She is a bird who has yet to realise she has talons with which to rend, or a beak with which to peck. You approve?” Hannibal asked when Will leaned in, head next to his, and watched him work.

“Just looking at it from your perspective.”

Hannibal’s laugh was soft and clicking, like a motor starting in his throat; *familiar sounds, always a joy to hear when he’d been tinkering to get the boat motor to tick over.* He wondered how far familiarity could be taken, how far it could stretch. How far would the overlap go? Would it consume him completely? Will knew he would have to ask himself, sooner or later, whether he could continue to blame everything on the Chesapeake Ripper.

“Does it look familiar?” he was asked.

“Not sure yet.”

“You seem quite unsure of many things, Will.”

“Not unsure,” he said, standing up, leaning against Hannibal’s chair on his right hand, “I’ve just been...grave digging.”

A suspenseful silence in which Hannibal seemed utterly still and yet Will could see the containment in him, holding the savage curiosity inside, “And what did you find?”

“Can I ask you a question?” Will asked instead.

“Of course.”

“Do you enjoy fear?”

The pen stopped. Will felt surprisingly uneasy as Hannibal set the instrument aside and sat back with a long inhale of breath. When Hannibal turned in his chair it was to look at him with eyes that knew what rested behind them. Will knew his own were still trying to hide a truth he’d buried out of sight and mind.

“That depends,” Hannibal said, “Giving or receiving?”

“Giving.”

“That is very specific. Have you recently caused another such fear that you would feel the need to ask about the nature of it?”

“In a way I suppose I’m always causing it. One way or another. Is it fair,” he stopped to swallow and breathe out, “to enjoy it?”

“I think it is fair to do what you are able to do.”

“Then possibilities are open to anyone willing to try for them?”

“Of course. Power is always enjoyable. And fear is only an extension of power.”

“But only on the right people.”

“Knowing how we feel about fear helps us understand ourselves. It forces us to adapt. Those that are scared of the dark learn to carry a torch.”

“And some aren’t scared at all,” Will said.

He started when he felt Hannibal touch his hand, lifting it to hold. Between them it looked like an offering.

“You are trembling, Will,” Hannibal said, his eyes alight as he looked at the hand in his palms, “Do I frighten you?”

It took a lot of courage to say it. Will knew it did, because to deceive Lecter meant to lie to him. To tell him the truth meant...

"...No," he fought it out, "but the truth does. The truth of what you are, and what I can accept."

"Then it is only fair to say that you are correct in your assumption. Enjoying fear is subjective. I do not enjoy that you are afraid of me."

"Which means you enjoy that someone else is. Or was."

"It is something we must move past."

"We've moved past a lot of things."

He shivered as he felt Hannibal trace the heavy, blue line of the vein in his wrist. It seemed overt, somehow, and Will watched the display with an odd sense of intimacy. Hannibal was always far more intimate when they were simply talking together than when they were physical with each other.

"This case has wriggled under your skin," Hannibal observed.

"It has the stench of something ugly all over it. The ideal that was created, the rebirth through death, is far more...poignant than the reason it came into being. I think whoever killed this woman is an ugly little person struggling with ugly little problems. Trying to create something I don't think he really understands the nature of. Like an artist tracing the Mona Lisa and then telling everyone that he knows why she's smiling."

"Such a shame."

"Isn't it?"

"It seems to me you are striving to protect, only what that is perhaps isn't clear to you yet."

"He's hurting people that don't deserve any more pain in their lives. Peter Bernadone is a man who knows what it means to..." Will fought to give words to the idea, "...to care so deeply that you'd risk your own sanity to save someone."

"You empathise with him?"

"I..." Will stopped, only to let out a breathy laugh and shake his head; he knew he looked sad, "I *was* him."

"And what are you now?"

There was no answer he could give. What was he? Will didn't think even Dr. Lecter with all his experience of the macabre and the bizarre could find something to define him now. Hannibal seemed to realise he would get no answer today.

"You said he's hurting people. Do you wish to hurt him back?" Hannibal asked, still looking at Will's hand, "There has always been a wonderful symmetry to your thinking. Like a balanced scale."

"Blind justice," Will felt himself smile coolly, "is that what we are? Separate sides of the scale?"

The evening light lengthened the shadows and set the curtains alight. Will wondered if this sort of world was the fairytale they both resided within now.

“The scale does not have separate sides,” Hannibal said, “for one cannot function without the other.”

“And what happens,” Will asked, mouth dry, “when they function together?”

“The truth.”

Will found that thin ice was always the most difficult for fishing.

The bird sat between them in a small, rectangular cage. It fluttered its wings and let out a bright, loud chirp which seemed unpredictable considering its small size. Peter Bernadone sat slumped with his hands in his lap, eyes glued to the small life frittering about beyond the bars.

It felt like an out of body experience. Seeing himself through another’s eyes. Peter was a fragile creature, but Will saw the potential. Potential for more; *it made him feel hopeful*. And yet that hope was tinged with a need to control, a want for someone to show you the deepest part of themselves. In a way he wished that Peter had never been touched by this ugliness. It only made Will fear for his own ability to compartmentalise.

“I said I’d let you know,” Will said, gesturing to the cage, “but I thought you’d rather see it in person, so to speak.”

“Yeah,” Peter said with a shy puff of breath, gesturing to the bird with a half hearted hand which he rushed to pull back, “but isn’t it...it evidence?”

The thought made Will smile with no heart behind it, “I’m not really FBI. I used to sorta be FBI, but now I’m *really* not.”

A smile and a laugh to try and cover the fact that ‘really not’ meant a hell of a lot more now than it ever had when he ‘kinda wasn’t’. FBI agent meant all of the things that Will couldn’t possibly promise to be. He knew, in a way, things that he didn’t want to be. Things that strapped down and contained the things he was turning into.

“I di..I didn’t kill anyone...” Peter was saying with a confused frown.

“I know that,” Will interrupted, “but it’s not, uh, not always relevant. We found Sarah Kraber’s grave,” there was a moment where he watched and knew he was looking for the weak spots in Peter’s reaction, “How did you find it?”

The bird chattered to itself, hopping around on the little perch to look up at them both in turn, head quick to swivel, small black eyes staring intently. Peter smiled, eyes shuttering, and lifted his hand as if to impart a secret.

“She’s-she’s already speaking t’me.”

“Yeah,” the smile was infectious for Will because he knew it was the only chance he had; to spark in the feelings of another who still knew what it was to be innocent. And when they spoke of the souls of the dead Peter’s blunt honesty was cutting.

Will knew it was cutting because when Peter said ‘You think I think this bird is Sara? She’s gone’, Will knew what he’d been doing. He knew what place he’d wondered into.

The place where he was supposed to see through the eyes of another had turned. These were his own eyes, these were his own ideals. In his fantasy the creator of the coffin birth had wanted to capture the soul of a dead friend in the wings of a bird, giving her a chance to be reborn into something which could fly away unstained.

And the truth was that Will hadn’t stood at the crime scene and tried to understand the killer. He sat, cold at the thought even as his heart thudded loudly with every beat, knowing that he’d imagined how he would have done it.

He’d done what he imagined the Ripper did when he saw another’s work. *Elevated it to something divine*.

“I wanted-wanted, I *wanted* you to find me because if you could find me you could find...him,” Peter seemed to struggle to say the word; it reminded Will of himself earlier that day, struggling to tell Hannibal the truth.

Are you afraid of me, Will?

All lies have a sliver of truth within them. Slid in deep like a splinter that stings and aches until the need to dig it out becomes unimaginable.

“Do you have a shadow Peter? Someone only you can see?”

And inside that truth rested all the insecurity and the sadness that the lie itself was born from.

“He’s someone you considered a friend,” Will said as the words stamped themselves upon his skin, carved themselves into his flesh, “He made you feel less alone until you saw what he really is.”

Made you feel like you were allowed to be who you were without consequence. Made you feel as if you could have someone by you who would not walk away when they realised what it was they were standing beside. Someone who only told the blank, hard truth and cared for you more than they cared for the conventions of society and even the laws that governed it.

And now let you know that there was only one way forward.

“No-no-*no* one will believe me,” Peter was saying, his tone that of a broken man; like the man afraid of the dark groping for a torch, “he’ll make sure no one believes me.”

Anger. He knew what it was. Anger swelled in his chest as he looked at a man who only wanted things to be understandable; for people to be kind and for his animals to be safe. It was a simple goal, even if the man who held it was not simple himself.

Was this what he saw when he looked at me then? Terrified, unprepared and alone. Suffering. Would you treat him the way Lecter treated you? Could you live with that?

“Peter,” he said decisively, pulling the man’s skittish gaze to him, “*I* will.”

“And there was truly nothing aberrant about Ingram’s statement?” Hannibal asked as he brushed the last of the snow from his immaculate coat and looked up at her.

Sometimes she wondered if she saw affection there, when he looked at her. She knew she was just rubbing salt in her own wounds but...it was difficult. Really difficult. She had admired him for as long as she’d known him, and she wouldn’t like to speculate on how long she had wanted more than that. The push that had jolted them together had been terrible but the one good thing to come from that tragedy had been them.

And now she was forced to constantly wonder if there had ever been a ‘them’ at all, or whether there was a chance there might still be in the future. Which only made her feel horribly guilty at the thought that she was trying to force Will to lose seemingly one of the only good things he had, but at the same time angry that she’d even let Lecter back into her house after what he’d done.

“Alana?” came the soft query.

“Um, no. I mean he was an arrogant jackass, but then he’s a social worker. He was a sterotype of the bad half of his profession, what more can I say? His alibi checked out and, other than the statement of a far more likely suspect in Bernadone, he’s clean. Shouldn’t you be talking to Jack about this?”

“Jack did not perform the interrogation. I thought it best to come from you.”

“Then I’m guessing Will hasn’t told you anything yet either?”

“I have not seen him since Ingram was brought in and then released.”

“Has he been speaking to Peter Bernadone? I heard he bartered to get the bird for him, the one that came out of the victim.”

“Will does not think that Bernadone is a suspect,” Hannibal said as he stayed by the door, as if ready to leave and yet also ready to enter.

“Will likes to see the best in everyone.”

“Oh,” Hannibal’s smile held genuine humour, “I don’t know about that. Still, I think he has affection for the man. His existence is...comforting. Perhaps he does not wish him to be guilty.”

“That doesn’t mean he isn’t. Honestly? I don’t think Will is going to...”

She stopped, clearing her throat. Hannibal’s eyes were on her, just as casual and normal as when he’d knocked on the door. Yet...now there was something there. Something familiar. *She remembered almond tart and strangers on the phone, Hannibal’s eyes turning to stone even as his face remained even and graceful while he and the stranger spoke words she would never hear the other side of*.

“Going to what?” Hannibal asked.

“I don’t think he liked the outcome, is all I’m saying.”

“I can imagine.”

“I’m sure you can,” again those eyes saw more than she would like; Alana walked towards the fridge and opened it just for something to do, “what kind of host am I, huh? I’ve got a bottle of white open, maybe you could help me finish it?”

“That sounds agreeable,” Hannibal inclined his head; there was a pause while she fetched glasses, broken only when Hannibal finally said, “I am glad that this friendship between us has not been severed. I hope you don’t mind me saying.”

“I’ll mind if you make an issue of it,” she said with a charming smile that she knew wouldn’t fool anyone.

“Of course, forgive me.”

“What kind of friend would I be if I didn’t?”

“I shall hang up my coat.”

And she judged herself for the fact that she did it, even if she felt vindicated at the outcome: that she crept to the door of the kitchen and, through the gap in the door, watched Hannibal slide off his coat and shake it out evenly before hanging it precisely on the hook and then, in an action that seemed almost nostalgic, he slid his hand into the pocket and pulled out his phone.

No one answered. Lecter left a message and Alana moved back to the dining table with a sorry conscience and a disgust for herself that she thought she might only lose through hate.

It seemed somewhat low-key, meeting in an underground parking lot. Will pulled his fleece hat tighter over his ears and zipped up his jacket before stepping out of the truck. The grey ground matched grey ceiling, and the bright yellow of Freddie Lounds’ car stuck out like a sore thumb on a hitchhiker. Will stuck his gloved hands in his pockets and waited.

“You know, I’m impressed,” she said with a sardonic smile, “I honestly didn’t expect you to show.”

“Neither did I,” Will shrugged.

“I’d love to stay and dance, but honestly I didn’t come for the scintillating conversation. So hand it over.”

Grinning, Will knew he could sense Freddie’s unease. She watched him through narrowed eyes and tried to look nonchalant. The echoing, low ceiling refracted the sound of a car on the level above drifting across the stone, tyre’s squeaking.

“You really don’t get it, do you?” he said shaking his head, “Do that and what? Have some low rent you hired take a picture of me? You’ve already shown how good you are at snapping secrets.”

“And what would I have to gain from that? I’ve already got my fill of evidence on you.”

“More, Freddie. Your kind always wants more.”

“Then I *should* have expected this,” she said, turning on her heel.

“But I can tell you where it is,” Will said, “if you have something for me.”

The clicking of stiletto heeled boots stopped. Lounds’ hair bounced like coiled snakes as she regarded him over her shoulder.

“I shouldn’t even bother,” she said, taking a long breath through her nose, “ask me why I bother with you Graham.”

“Honestly? I’d rather not know.”

His words jolted a laugh from her that wasn’t pleasant. She rubbed at her face with a maroon gloved hand and walked to her car. Will itched to stop her, tell her, make her wait, *the thought of what the truth might do...*but then she leaned in through the open driver’s side window and picked up a small envelope. She returned, tossing it to him with a poker face.

“Where’s mine?” she asked.

“I mailed it to you.”

“So old fashioned,” she rolled her eyes, “I’m sure it’ll be worth it. God knows you understand the consequences.”

The envelope contained a long invitation, carved in gold curlicue on thick, ivory card. He looked at her, frowning.

“It’s a gallery opening, tomorrow night, address is at the bottom. She’ll be there.”

“Who?”

“Bedelia du Maurier,” Freddie said, “she’s Hannibal Lecter’s psychiatrist.”

A world of possibilities opened up beneath Will’s feet, so much so that he had to force them not to swallow him whole. *An insight into the man who could not be seen.* The envelope was quickly closed. When he looked up Freddie was watching him steadily. Will tipped his head and returned the look. He couldn’t help but be curious.

“What’s the catch?”

“I thought you already understood the catch, Graham.”

“Well besides the obvious? You don’t look like a woman pushed to gloat.”

“You want the truth?” she asked, smiling, “I’ve always been fascinated by the truth. No matter what it takes to get to it. Like something long buried and priceless. I like to find them with my hands, dig them out. The bigger the truth, the more pretty the treasure. And right now the truth is,” she turned to her car and opened the door, “that no matter how much I’d enjoy watching you crushed under the bureaucratic might of the FBI, I want to know just as much as you do what Hannibal Lecter’s secrets are, because in my experience the bigger the pay check the bigger the skeletons in the closet.”

It took all of his willpower not to laugh, even if it would have been stained with bitterness.

“They questioned him,” Will said, “and then they let him go.”

“There wasn’t enough to hold him on,” Beverly said pragmatically, “even guilty people can walk without setting off the alarms.”

“Pity.”

Looking at the crime scene photographs, rows of bodies, Ingram’s victim’s laid out like shrouds to be mourned. A procession that led to an obvious ring leader. The lab looked like an archaeological dig site from some unknown tomb. Body parts and bones and strips of cloth and dirt. People put in the ground like sacrifices, and now they were in his care. Will closed his eyes and opened them but nothing changed.

“Yeah,” Beverly said as she continued to write up her field report, “isn’t it just.”

Clark Ingram. Will liked to keep the name in his head as he looked at the man’s picture. Thirty three and a half, five foot ten with short cropped hair and a smile that seemed to seep from his mouth. He’d listened to the recording of his interview, three times. The man was very, very good, he wouldn't deny it. They had nothing on him.

Yet he could see, it was written all over his voice. Smug and condescending trying to hide beneath benevolent and kind. The sort of rotting philosophy that couldn’t help but puff up above the smell of the roses. A slinking narcissist with clean hands. Liked to watch, Will would put money on it (they’d found spermicide on the hands of two of the victims. Will had concluded that he’d made them handle a condom). *Liked to watch them so he didn’t have to get his hands dirty. Then once he was done, he watched them suffocate, lips gasping, face pale, turning purple with the need to live even as they drew the dirt down into their lungs. Did he absorb their fear? Did he stand over them and look into their eyes as they clouded?*

Would he enjoy doing the same? Would Ingram beg like the coward he was? Will was sure he would beg. He seemed the type.

“He got everything he needed without ever having to touch them,” Will said quietly.

“He must’ve touched them at some point,” Brian shrugged as he looked down at the soil sample results, “unless he can use the force.”

“Or a vacuum pump,” Price added, picking up a bauble of dry soil delicately in tweezers, “you don’t get soil packed this tightly in your throat by inhaling. The dirt was forced down there.”

“Sounds like sexual frustration to me,” Zeller said.

“I don’t know why you’re looking at me while you say that,” Price replied.

“Sarah Kraber fought back,” Beverly said, looking over at the evidence, spread out like a bad jigsaw puzzle, “maybe he didn’t get what he wanted from her. Maybe that’s why her grave was a little shallower than the rest.”

“She didn’t do as she was told,” Will said.

He'd known her for a long time. That was what he realised when Beverly Katz's eyes flicked up to him, narrowed for nothing but a split second before jumping back to the mess of dirt and filthy clothes and photographs on the table. She knew him, his tone and his movements and his moods, enough to find aberrances, and the first thought to jump into his mind had been...

...you'll have to be careful with her...

...and he wished it wasn't.

"If she didn't play into his fantasy," Brian continued without hesitation, "then why was she the one in the horse? That seems like special treatment."

Price gave him an inexplicable stare, "That says a lot about you. Maybe he was ashamed of this one. Wanted to hide her?"

"He didn't have the capacity to do it," Will interrupted; again the glance, again it slid away. Will couldn't keep the sorrow from his voice as he picked up a picture of the horse lying in the hay, "he wasn't kind enough."

"Well if he didn't then who did?"

Staying quiet was only fair, wasn't it? Will told himself it was. Fair not only for Peter but fair for himself. The gloves were tight and constricting, keeping his tactile senses dull as he snapped them on and picked up the shoe from one of the many victims they'd dug up from the killer's dump site, once a pale blue high heel but now filthy and spoiled.

"Someone who didn't want to see her become just another nameless corpse in the garden."

She was the only one who followed him. Out the labs and take a right to Chromatography and then up the stairwell two floors to the break rooms. It smelled of burnt toast and the sun didn't make it inside, stopped by the high monolith of the teaching facility across the way. It made the room seem like the inside of a shoebox with a hole cut for the window. Thankfully it was empty, which was all he'd been hoping for.

Will poured himself a coffee because he wanted something for his hands to do. He didn't drink it, even as Beverly sat down at the table with its chipped lacquer and ran a hand through her hair.

"You know, I remember when you used to get angry about things like this," she looked at him bluntly.

"I am angry about things like this," Will said, looking down into his cup.

"Funny, because you look like someone's just told you you've got two days to live."

He laughed because he couldn't help it. Because he'd been holding it in from all the other situations where it wouldn't be appropriate. Hell, he knew it wasn't appropriate now but at least here he could contain it. Damage limitation. Will had to ask himself when everything had become so damn systematised.

"That wasn't a joke you know," Beverly said.

"I know."

“Gonna tell me what’s wrong?”

“No.”

“Wow,” she let out a stiff smile and shook her head, “that’s the most truthful thing you’ve said today. You know things are getting tricky again, don’t you? I know Jack always goes on about compartmentalising but...it seems like you’re losing touch.”

The staleness of the room seemed to slip into their conversation. Will knew he had to be careful. *Why are you being careful?* He wanted to ask himself. Compartmentalised. The word mocked him. It had never been an option, not from day one. Because Hannibal had seen it, like a man seeing past the two way mirror he’d erected, the one that allowed him to look out but no one else to look in.

“*No forts in the bone arena of your skull for things you love*”

Once upon a time he’d been able to build walls. Now where the walls used to be there was nothing but crumbled stone, and the stage was open and flat; a level playing field. The bars of the cage had been dismantled and everything was sliding into one. Once upon a time Hannibal had figured out Will 's greatest fear, that he would never have that normal life because he was not normal. And then he had offered him a new one. A place in the palace beyond the world of wrong-doing and right-doing.

“Jack and I,” Will said carefully, “have an agreement.”

“About?” Beverly didn’t sound impressed that he was avoiding her question.

“The Chesapeake Ripper.”

“Will, you know what Jack needs. He hasn’t had his closure because he wanted to put the cuffs on the Ripper himself. Don’t play into his fantasy just to give him what he wants.”

“You saw Matthew Brown. You saw Lehrwood.”

“I saw displays like the Ripper would have done. Doesn’t mean it was who Jack wants it to be. Will just...” she stopped to take a breath, “what aren’t you telling me?”

The list was so long it made him feel guilty.

“I’ll deal with Jack,” Will said, finally looking her in the eye.

“I’m sure you’d like it to be that simple,” she said, standing, “but it’s not. We’re all in this, one way or another.”

“I thought friends were supposed to listen to each other,” Will said, unable to keep the severity out of his voice; *to him it sounded a little like desperation.*

“I’ll listen,” Beverly said reasonably as she walked to the door, “when you start talking.”

And everything he was being forced to sacrifice began to take shape. Will looked up at the ceiling, at the old polystyrene tiles, and wondered what it would feel like. Being the one standing in the darkness with another beside you, where all others had vanished. There was a calmness to it, almost like a smooth taste. Was this what Hannibal felt as he flowed through life? Like water seeking out cracks to pour through.

That single, solitary sanctuary. Will knew where he had to go.

It was dark by the time he arrived, alone and dusted in snow. When he found Peter, the man was covered in blood. The old animal rescue barn was still and cold and the heavy, metallic smell seemed to sit in the air like stains. It was like a scene from a dream. As his footsteps drew him closer he would have believed he might be asleep, if it weren't for the chill biting at his skin or his heart racing in his chest.

"Peter."

The man stalled as the hunter's knife reached the horse's sternum. The red leaking out was rich like wine, flowing over the knife and down onto slippy fingers. Wary brown eyes looked over their shoulder to catch Will's stare. They didn't leave him as Will walked the expanse of the smooth, flat cement floor and stopped next to him, hunkering down until they were level.

The man lying prostrate on the ground by the horse's head was something Will only paid attention to once he had the knife out of Peter's hand. Clark Ingram looked like he could be dead, but on putting his un-gloved fingers to the man's throat Will found his pulse. Slow and steady. Will noted the blood matted patch of hair on the side of Ingram's head, and the hammer lying a few feet from them.

When he turned to Peter, still kneeling by the horse, his hands held up before him as if he didn't know what to do with them, Will knew. *Knew that the anger Beverly wasn't able to see still pumped furious and hot, even beneath the layer of resentment and sadness.* The cages in the room stood empty, and the horse's great black, glossy eye stared at the ceiling lifeless.

"He took them all away," Peter said, his voice level even as his face showed his grief.

"I'm sorry," Will said, putting his hand on the man's shoulder and helping him to stand.

"Some of them will survive," Peter's eyes scattered across the empty cages, "some of them won't. Some of them will come back but...but I won't be here when they do, will I?"

Shaking his head felt like a death knell, "No."

"I think..." Peter screwed up his face and shook his head before continuing, "I think he deserves to die."

"Yes," Will nodded, "yes he does. But you don't deserve to kill him."

"I-I-I hate him. You know? I never knew what it was but...he taught me how to hate him. I didn't want to kill anyone. I just wanted him to know what it was like, what he di...did to her. To wake up in the death he created and-and choke on it."

"I envy you that hate," Will said, "it makes it so much easier when you know how to feel."

"Makes what easier?"

He couldn't answer him.

Down together by the cooling blood and the body of a man not yet a corpse, Will Graham and Peter Bernadone crossed paths. It felt sickening because he wanted to hold onto that moment. Will grasped it in both hands and kept a tight grip; *remembering how it was to feel that want for understanding. That bright hot need to make everything right*. And then the realisation that he had no real correlation with right and wrong anymore. Everything had blurred together. Sometimes he felt as if he were sliding into another, where the antlers cracked through the skull and the blood ran from his mouth.

Sometimes he wondered if he had known that there were no half measures. *All or nothing.* That this was just all part of the metamorphoses.

“Come on,” Will guided him by the shoulder, “I want you to come with me now.”

Outside it was still snowing heavily. A dreamscape of snowflakes drifting in and out of the light. The sky was pitch dark and the rest of the world around them obscured. Will stepped back into the barn and grabbed a rough blanket, something he guessed might have been for the horse. It was pungent with the smell of animal and feed. He put it around Peter’s shoulders and the man reflexively grabbed it and held it tight with red stained hands.

“Where are all..?” Peter stalled, confused, “Where are all the other-the other FBI?”

“I told you before, I’m really not FBI anymore Peter. My car is over there, see it? It’s open. Go get warm.”

“But I hurt him,” Peter’s frown intensified and he couldn’t look Will in the face, “I *hurt* him. I have to pay for that, just like he did.”

“Would you let me take care of this?” Will asked, because he knew what he needed. He knew what he needed and Peter was the only one who could let him have it.

“I don’t-I-I don’t...” Peter stammered.

“There’s been enough cruelty here because of him. That’s what he did to you. That’s what he did to all those women. To Sarah. Cruelty for cruelty’s sake. I don’t want...” Will stopped and looked up at the darkness above him, watching the snow appear from within its depths and fritter against his face; he looked back down and knew that Peter was staring at the ground, “I don’t want any more of that for you. Let me take care of this.”

The silence seemed dampened by the snow, as if the little muted bubble still existed around them. Here and now the crossroads diverged. When Peter answered Will almost missed it; a jerky nod of the head, repeated three times before Peter shuffled off under his blanket towards the light of Will’s truck sitting down past the empty horse paddock. Slowly he drifted into the darkness and out of sight.

The puff of breath Will let out was a cloudy milk of air, like something emerging from his mouth and disappearing into the night. He felt like someone who had just suffered a terrible loss. The piece of himself that knew what it was to always look for a way out had tumbled down with the snow onto the laden ground.

For he knew what came next. He knew what he would do because instead of leaving with Peter he turned back into the barn where a stunned Ingram was crawling to his knees, hands slipping in the blood. His hand reached for the hammer, his face a snarl of impotent rage until he saw Will.

“Officer, thank god. Please help. Someone-” Ingram stopped to cough roughly and do a damn good impression of a distressed man while Will watched, “he tried to-tried to *kill* me!”

He knew there was no other way but to understand. To know.

Was this what it was like, Will wondered, *to feel no remorse?* A man like this was less than detestable. Someone whose vision was small and design lacked character. Someone who was *cruel for the sake of cruelty*. That was what Peter had missed from his punishment. To have Ingram suffocate would surely be only one half of the coin.

He closed his eyes and opened them; everything stayed the same. Would it feel good? He knew the answer to that already.

“Can you hear me?” Ingram looked as if his act couldn’t stand the strain of being ignored, “I need your help!”

“You might want to crawl back in there,” Will said, eyes moving to the prepared horse even as he reached for his holster, “if you know what’s good for you.”

They called them the Chapel Rooms. Perhaps there was something in that but he was sure that from his point of view that would be some sort of irony. Or perhaps it should be humorous. Maybe it should tickle him somewhere. Hannibal’s words swam to mind. *Murder must feel good to God too, he does it all the time.*

The invitation pushed him past the barrier of those waiting outside without them. The well dressed brunette at the entranceway asked if she could take his coat. He ignored her as she slipped out of his field of vision. The doors opened and he wondered what would be behind them; *a long white corridor? A grand staircase as she held onto the banister and pushed her dark hair behind her ear? A set of wagging tails, happy to see him?* Doors held so many secrets that it was becoming difficult to hope for more.

This door revealed a conversion – an old manor house painted in gallery white, the original floorboards stripped and re-varnished to a veritable glow. Bright lighting and yet those who stood inside, decked in fashion and dripping with superiority, made an atmosphere all of their own. Will walked through them as a hunter walked through the woods at night. Finding his way through was Will’s specialty.

She was simple to find because he recognised her best from the back. That had been how he’d first seen her. This time there was no white coat, instead a black dress hugged her shoulders and twisted down across her body to taper off at the knees.

There was no one else in this particular room, perhaps more a large alcove than another room entirely. Before her hung a well lit painting in blacks and blues; a hollow eyed figure sitting between two bisected halves of a cow. When he stopped next to her he wondered if the painter had been in pain when they created it. For Will, the canvas screamed in agony.

“Francis Bacon,” the woman said in a familiar, husky tone when Will had remained silent, “not to everyone’s taste.”

“Is it to yours?” he asked, aware of the quiet, background hum from the other rooms.

“I suppose there’s something therapeutic about it,” she turned to look at him.

“Your scream in another’s mouth? There is something useful in hating vicariously.”

“Let me guess, Best of Baltimore?” he watched her with a blank look, “No? Not an art critic then, I can’t imagine any of the other trite magazines having a writer like you.”

“Let’s just say I have a vested interest.”

Her smile was interested even as it was fooled. Will thought she looked like a sculpture of beauty, held in place by pins and zips. Her face held none of the fear it had when he’d seen it before, staring at Hannibal as if she thought she might be dancing on the end of a line. Now she seemed unwisely normal.

“Bedelia Du Maurier,” she said, offering her hand.

“Will Graham,” he said, shaking it.

It was an imagined feeling but he thought he could sense her breathing halt, her blood stutter. Suddenly that same hesitancy flickered back into her blue eyes and she looked away to the painting.

Was it some sort of release? Will wondered as he too looked back to the painting, *To imagine that brutality, that horror, and stare it in the face defiantly.*

“It’s nice to finally meet you,” Will said, joining her in her contemplation, “I’ve been curious about someone to whom Hannibal might hitch his sanity.”

There was a pause during which she took a long, deep breath and released it, “Am I to assume you were invited?”

“Not by anyone you’d know. But then we all have our secrets, and you have Hannibal’s.”

“I thought, when he spoke of you,” she looked momentarily disappointed, “that you’d be smarter than this.”

“There’s only so far intelligence can stretch before instinct takes over. Tell me, does instinct keep you from flying the coop?”

“Instinct is subjective.”

“You’re Hannibal Lecter’s psychiatrist,” Will said, unable to keep down the sardonic tone, “surely subjectivity and instinct are pretty much separate issues by this point.”

“Do you want me to keep this a secret, Will?” she asked.

“I don’t think that matters anymore. I thought you’d understand that.”

“You can never be too sure how far along the rabbit hole someone is, until you ask. Has Hannibal asked you yet?”

A shivering understanding quivered between them. He knew what she was asking. Had he been to the place so many others had? *Had Hannibal asked him how it felt to kill?* Which made him wonder why she brought it up.

The dead patient, he’d found the story when researching her name once Freddie had handed it over. Once upon a time, Bedelia Du Maurier had a patient prone to violence. Then one day that patient

died in unusual circumstance. The coroner's report said the young man had a fit and suffocated in Du Maurier's office after he attacked her. He knew it couldn't be that simple. *Will could easily imagine Hannibal, standing in the background of it all, watching and marvelling at the human capability for violence.*

Will wondered what she would do if she knew everything that had happened over the past months. Then he had to ask himself, *does she already know?* He had no clue what Hannibal divulged to this enigmatic woman. She stood like a sphinx, hiding her true nature behind her red-lipsticked smile.

"Maybe he doesn't have to ask."

She let out a puff of breath and shook her head, "I hope you're not truly that blind or this will be a very short affair."

"You sound," Will frowned and smiled, "jealous."

"Familiarity breeds contempt," she said, "and sometimes understanding. Understanding is the most dangerous."

"Then I must be dangerous."

"You're..." she seemed to stop herself, frowning, then carried on recklessly, "you are a siren, Mr. Graham. Much like I was once. Hannibal is captivated by you."

"Like you were once?" Will said, avoiding the obvious lure, "Then how have you managed to walk away unscarred?"

The proof was in the pudding. Will watched as she turned her face toward him and smiled, one not as cracked and broken as he'd expected, but instead plastered over with a confidence only those secure in their beliefs could have.

"It is simple when you are with someone behind the veil, while everyone else is on the other side."

The sound of footsteps approached and then, as Bedelia looked back to the painting, they stopped at the doorway. Will turned to look at the man there dressed impeccably in a midnight blue suit with sky blue shirt and tie. He stood in the empty space with two glasses of wine, one in each hand.

Hannibal Lecter looked surprised; truly taken aback. Will drank it in. It tasted sweet, like honey. Another for the list of new discoveries. He wondered if the wounds showed in his eyes. Would Hannibal be able to see them? Would he know how to stop the bleeding?

"Hello Hannibal."

"Hello Will. What an unexpected pleasure," Hannibal walked in to stand beside him, seeming unperturbed; Bedelia took her wine, "you should have told me you were invited."

"I didn't really know about it until the last minute."

"I do hope you have done introductions," Hannibal took a sip from his glass.

"Oh, none necessary I'm sure," Will smiled.

The air around them felt solid, as if he reached out his hand he could touch it. Break it. Shatter it. Perhaps draw a new reality onto it. The painting grinned at all three of them, a bizarre judge at a doomed court.

“I had no idea you enjoyed observing the artistic,” Hannibal said.

“I’ve seen my share of masterpieces. How’s your cultured eye, Dr Du Maurier?”

She did not answer. Will wondered if she was afraid of what Hannibal might think, or afraid of what he might do. In the end he began to think she might be more dangerous than even Hannibal could be. *Everyone needs a confidant*. She knew what he was, the devil between them, and still she stood by his side.

“Bedelia enjoys Goya,” Hannibal answered for her.

“A man who knew the truth about the horrors of humanity,” Will said.

“Truth is essential to art,” Bedelia finally spoke.

“That is very astute,” Hannibal smiled as if he were enjoying himself greatly, “every act of beauty must hold a truth at its core. Your gloves Will,” he observed, “they are a mess.”

He looked down to find the leather scraped and the russet of blood flaking against the material, “I suppose everything gets messy after a while.”

Her blue eyes stared at him but he could not return it.

“You don’t look yourself,” Hannibal said.

“Who do I look like?”

“Perhaps I should take you home. Bedelia, forgive me.”

“Not at all,” she said, “I can find my own way back.”

The journey was soft, *like the smell of hay on the air*. Hannibal put Will into his Bentley without asking how Will had arrived at the gallery. They drove through the snow and Will couldn’t help but see *the road unfolding before them, his truck driving quietly across the dirt track while Peter sat beside him, wrapped in the blanket and silent to sounds from behind him*.

“Have you been to the farm Will?”

“Is it obvious?” Will asked as they turned right onto Hannibal’s street.

“The smell of horse is quite distinctive. That is blood on your gloves, is it not?”

“Peter Bernadone tried to commit suicide tonight.”

Hannibal paused, observing Will when he could afford to look away from the road.

“Is that true?”

“No,” Will said, shaking his head and pursing his lips, “it’s what I told Jack. Peter let all of his animals go, killed his horse. He wanted to climb inside, be reborn the way he wanted for Sarah Kraber.”

“And Clark Ingram?”

“Not a sign of him anywhere.”

“I see.”

They pulled up into the driveway. The house was dark, a void of life. Will was aware that Hannibal was waiting for him to move.

“Abigail is not home,” Hannibal observed; when Will looked to him he knew there were things left unspoken, “she always lights the sitting room fire and stays there until I return.”

“She’s safe. She’s at my house.”

“She would not be safe here?” Hannibal asked.

Will didn’t answer. When Will exited the car, Hannibal followed. When Will walked through the front door, Hannibal followed. When Will removed his coat and his gloves and his shoes then walked to the dining room, lights still out, Hannibal followed.

Flicking on the light switch was simple. Will felt his hands curl around the frame of the chair at the head of the dining table, listening to the muffled grunts and puffed breaths that sprang up. Hannibal walked up to his left and stood beside him. Together they looked down at the man laid there upon his back on the polished wood like a supper sacrifice, struggling against the rough rope binding his arms tightly to his sides and the thick strip of tarpaulin gagging his mouth.

Clark Ingram looked just as Will had known he would; *as if he were going to beg.* Hannibal tipped his head and ignored the half muffled pleas garbling from Ingram’s taped up lips.

“Would you tell me Will, what happened tonight?”

“Peter nearly did something he would have regretted,” Will said as Hannibal walked around the table; Ingram’s wild eyes snapped to him, confused, and followed him as he circled.

“With every choice lies the possibility of regret,” Hannibal looked up once he reached the opposite end of the table; he caught and held Will’s stare. His calm helped. Will anchored to it, “However, if I choose not to do something it’s usually for a good reason. Can you say the same?”

“I’m riddled with regrets,” Will admitted, looking back to Ingram as the man resumed his struggles twofold.

“A life without regret would be no life at all.”

"I don't want...to be afraid anymore."

The words made Hannibal alert, as if some unknown cue had been triggered. Will wanted to explain because he knew, of everyone, Hannibal would understand him.

“I found him at the animal rescue, in Peter’s stables. Ingram tried to kill him, Peter said. Tried to add him to his trite little list of victories and I regret that...that I didn’t do it.”

“What, Will?”

“Kill him right there,” the words set off a fit of muffled shouts from Ingram, “I would have, only...it would have been an undoing. I didn’t want to undo myself, just for him.”

Hannibal said as he pressed his finger to Ingram’s covered mouth, “You would be wise to be silent,” he said; the man followed the command, eyes scattered over the room, seeming fully caught by terror. Hannibal returned his stare to Will, “Then it’s not your actions you regret, it’s the lack thereof.”

“That would be more accurate.”

Hannibal continued as if he had just arrived home from a particularly pleasant evening and poured himself a single malt from the decanter, topped up with a dash of water. There was an intrigue to his walk, as if he were trying to think of the most appropriate question. He thought of Bedelia Du Maurier’s words, as if remembering a warning he should know off by heart. ‘*Hannibal is captivated by you’,* she’d said it as if it were something she’d rather he wasn’t.

Will did not watch him move as he approached once more, but he was aware of him, *his presence*, as if it were stalking him. As Hannibal stepped next to him and took a soft sip from his glass, Will remembered what it had felt like; *in his dreams Hannibal had never struggled against Will’s angry hands, seeking a keen revenge that would right all the wrongs done.* Hannibal was close enough to smell, his cologne flaring in Will’s senses. A dream come nightmare come reality.

“Tell me Will,” he asked, “did you make the decision to spare him on the basis of anticipating the regret you would feel, taking another life?”

“...Yes.”

“Anticipating regret often leads to dubious decisions,” Hannibal leaned forwards to place the barely touched glass down next to Ingram’s head, the man’s eyes now wide and staring, his breath puffing out the tarp only to haul it back in, again and again, “you must adapt your behaviour to avoid feeling the same way again.”

“Adapt,” Will breathed in the word, “Evolve,” let it manifest, “Become,” imagined the truth of it.

The ideals of superior philosophy. That of someone capable of being part of society whilst also living above it. *What would it be like?* Will’s skin shivered. *What would it be like, to have no fear? What would it be like, to feel that way again? The way he had when he’d pulled the trigger over and over and Hobbs had burst with red and slid to the floor.*

“I want you to close your eyes, Will,” Hannibal’s voice was clear and precise, dancing just behind his right ear, “and imagine a version of events you would not have regretted.”

There should have been resistance. He should have resisted the pull. Instead he did as he was asked.

It was cold. The barn was quiet. The snow fell outside. It was a second, a split second of time, in which he stood above Ingram as he knelt like a supplicant, and fired the gun in his hand, *the*

chamber rotated, the trigger squeezed tight, the hammer slammed forwards and the bullet exploded from the barrel. He watched as Clark Ingram's head burst open, the gaping circle of gore in his forehead precedence to the fountain of brain and bone and blood that sprayed from the back and lit up the walls like a celebration.

Opening his eyes returned him to the dining room. To the reality of what he had done, resting within the endless possibilities of what he could do. He looked down at Ingram once more and felt his lips part slightly. There was a sound approaching, one which haunted his footsteps.

"What did you see?" Hannibal asked.

Looking up to his right was like stepping back in time, *back through the looking glass*. The great, black eye of the stag stared back at him from Hannibal's gaze. He remembered that night as if it were another life altogether, driving through the snow with the itching feeling of Alana's kiss on his lips and the guilt of his own sanity nipping at him. The memory of Hannibal's voice and the taste of whiskey on his lips and the soft silk of his nightclothes against sweat soaked skin. The sleepwalk that had brought him here, to this room, and shown him the viscera of Hobbs' haunting.

The great, black stag that had looked at him as if it knew him, as if it saw what Hobbs had been able to recognise in the few last sparks of his brain as he died. *A kindred spirit*. He wondered how different he appeared now that the veil had been lifted. Back then he was living under a delusion. Now he knew what had to be done to force the world back on track.

"A missed opportunity," Will said, "to feel like I did when I killed Garret Jacob Hobbs. To understand how it felt to watch Matthew die."

"And what did that feel like Will?" Hannibal said as if testing him, "Excitement bumping around in your chest like a cold medallion?"

"I felt," Will knew he no longer needed to close his eyes in order to see, "a quiet sense of power."

The hand that slipped into his hair found its fingers in his neat, trimmed curls and down to the back of his neck. It was a smooth motion, without resistance, as he turned his head to look into those glossy, black eyes. Will blinked slowly and thought he heard hooves, *clip clip clipping over well preserved floorboards*. As Hannibal cupped his cheek Will knew that somewhere along the line he'd slipped, allowed it all to grow too real in his mind. An animal instinct which blossomed into a powerful need.

We'll fall, and we'll pull others with us like rag dolls. Is this the reckoning you wanted? Will stared at the stag and heard his own words. *Too late, my friend, too late.*

"I felt the same," Will said, "whenever I dreamed of killing you."

The smile should not have been there but it appeared Hannibal could not resist the infectious high of the moment.

"Good," Hannibal said as he held Will steady, staring into his eyes; together they looked down at Ingram, as if seeing that which would allow the two halves of the scale to function together, "hold onto that feeling."

Chapter End Notes

Here's a link to the Francis Bacon painting Will and Bedelia are looking at - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Figure_with_Meat#/media/File:Figure_with_Meat_Bacon.jpg

Divisé

Chapter Summary

> Apologies for the long, long, long wait! I have had a lot going on in life and very little time for writing. I hope that this story is still intriguing, and hello to any new readers joining. It's time to delve into my so far unexplored world of murder husbands and Mason Verger...wish Will all of your luck. He's going to need it.
>
> Divisé = Split

“What is it? Is it real?” hands touched flesh gently, tracing strong features of brows and cheeks as if trying to dig underneath, “Sometimes I wonder if we’re just a frame, a picture drawn on top. Something to pretend with. A...a self-inflicted illusion. Do we drop out of sight when people stare at us? Do they think they know what they see, when really we’re stood behind them grinning? It’s just a ruse, but it’s so organically volatile. It fools the hindbrain into staying when they should run. How does it work? Do they not see what they would expect? Is it the lack of fear alone that makes our world a happy bubble when it should be pitchforks and torches?” hands pulled up and lanced through soft hair, nose and mouth coming down to join them; inhaled scent of cinnamon and rose water, “If the illusion is so strong how do I know I’m not trapped? Maybe I’m dangling in the web, wrapped tight, and this is my life flashing before my eyes. You’d give me everything I ever wanted, wouldn’t you? Right before you put the knife in me? I think you’d like to see me smile as you killed me. It would be fitting,” he felt his hands being pulled down as fingers wrapped around his wrists, knees coming to kneel against soft fabric, “You said fear spoils the meat.”

It was very difficult for Will Graham not to kiss Hannibal Lecter in that moment, as he knelt before the fire. More for the need to connect to someone, rather than a need to be romantic in their setting. It should have been, he thought arbitrarily, it should have been romantic, shouldn’t it? He’d never cared for that sort of bullshit, but in that moment it was all he could think about. *It should have been enviable...and maybe it still was.*

Around him was a soft duvet that Hannibal had pulled down from a high cupboard. He had done it because Will had been shivering. It was a gesture, more than anything. They both knew Will hadn’t been shivering from the cold. Will knelt before him, Hannibal sitting with his legs tucked in against the bed which he sat atop; *like a statue in some Greek temple. The statue of Zeus at Olympia, looking down on those that entered with intrigued eyes*. It made Will feel small but absurdly safe. Leaning forwards he put his head against Hannibal’s knees and swallowed, eyes closed.

“I recommend,” Hannibal said softly when he knew for sure that Will had halted his declamation, “that you finish drinking what I prepared for you. It will help you sleep.”

“What if I don’t want to sleep,” Will rebutted.

“Dreams are what help us make sense of the world,” Will felt a hand in his hair, gentle but not kind, “and you have much to realign today, darling. I will find you something to wear.”

“Please,” he said, almost whispering; lifting his head he allowed Hannibal to stand.

Although, perhaps now it was a mix of the shock and the chill. Will sank back into the duvet and began to feel the heat of the fire against his skin. It cracked and popped behind him like a merry dance, *ignorant and naive.* He had been wearing clothes earlier. Absently he wondered where they were. He had been wearing them, and then they had been in the basement and they’d gotten dirty, and Will had decided he didn’t want to wear them any more. Maybe they were still there, down on the clinically white floor. He vaguely remembered walking up the stairs and being cold. Maybe he’d already been naked then.

When Hannibal returned he stood for a moment by the bed, flickering golden in the firelight. Will looked up at him from his vantage on the floor, curled into the duvet. His eyes were dazed but not afraid, he knew from the fact that Hannibal took the time to sit down on the floor next to him and hand him a set of pyjamas. They were soft, fleeced. Will scrunched the fingers of his right hand into them again and again. The action became repetitive, uncontrollable. Will frowned deeply, feeling the disjointed emotions in his mind vying for a way out.

“Am I still supposed to smell it?” he asked after a moment’s silence, “I washed, I washed everywhere but I can still smell it...”

“It bothers you?”

“He is...a corruption,” Will said strictly, “that bothers me. He's...” Will waited, took a breath and continued, “I just want to be clean.”

The hand returned gently, caressing his face. Will closed his eyes and opened them. Everything was the same.

“I understand,” Hannibal said, “I would like you to get dressed, it is very chill. I will put on the heating and then I will fix your problem. Here, give me your hand.”

There seemed to be a blank in his mind between being curled on the floor, cold, half hidden by the blanket, and then sitting up in the bed, dressed, warmer. Not a disconnect in the way it had been before, with holes in his memories and fear in his mind. This time it was dreamlike, fuzzy, comforting. *Something somewhere was screaming*. He ignored it. He had to.

Hannibal sat on the side of the bed, twisted to face him. He held a swab of cotton wool gripped by sturdy tweezers. Will could smell some sort of cleaning agent, strong and astringent. A perfumed psychedelia that seemed to make the room spin and expand.

“Tip your head back,” he was ordered gently; Will did as he was told, and Hannibal began gently cleaning around his nose, inserting the cotton wool into each nostril and twisting.

When they were dropped into a small metal bowl Hannibal had brought with him Will could see tiny smudges of pink and red. He tipped his head to the right, like a dog trying to catch a far off noise that it didn’t like the sound of. He took his bottom lip between his teeth and felt his teeth catch the dry skin. It felt real. It felt grounding. A bubbling need to make a sound rose in his throat, *what noise he wasn’t sure, just a noise, some noise, something, anything*.

“Sometimes, if the spray is forceful enough,” Hannibal said as he put all his instruments, the bowl and the cotton wool into a large ziplock bag that had been sitting on the floor; then the gloves that Will hadn’t even noticed were peeled off and dropped in on top and all was sealed away, “or if it is

in a fine enough mist to be inhaled, it ends up in the nostrils. I agree the smell is unpleasant. I did tell you not to remove the hood."

"I couldn't see his face," Will said, watching everything Hannibal did with his hands like a dog follows a hand holding a ball.

"I designed it to be perfectly visible," Hannibal said with a raised brow as he went about disposing of the bag into a box, shutting it tight and placing it by the door.

"I couldn't see his face," Will insisted, "I wanted to see his eyes..."

"I understand this is new for you," Hannibal said, this time sitting closer, their thighs pressed against one another, leaning in until Hannibal's right hand was flat beside Will's left hip and their chests almost pressed together, "and I know the power of curiosity, but I would like you to pay more attention to me next time, hmm?"

A need to argue took him suddenly, deep and terrifying. *The screaming grew loud, incandescent, like a banshee wailing; then silence.* Will found his way up with eyes that had been staring down at his hands, now looking into *maroon flecked gold with the light from the fire, so many times he'd seen that colour stare inside of him, finding exactly what it wanted*. He should be struggling, like the fish on the line. Self-preservation should have kicked in, made his mouth go dry, made his limbs freeze and then burst with activity, make him bolt or stall in the headlights. Long before he reached this point Will knew he *should have paid attention to his instincts*. But then the worst part was knowing, deep down, that his instincts hadn't done anything he had expected. They hadn't forced fight or flight, hadn't forced right or wrong. They were past that now.

He opened his mouth to wish he could say something expected, something exonerating, something that showed he was still capable of...

"Yes, teacher," he said drolly.

Hannibal smiled and leaned in to kiss his forehead.

There was always a pleasantness to a day that started with the good memory of the one that came before it. Waking brought with it a sense of fulfilment, an inner warmth. Victorious, that was how he felt. Reaping the benefits of his toil, his labour being that of month's work. The most important game he had ever had the joy of creating. The shining light of the day seemed brighter, more dewey. *Will Graham belonged to him, and him alone.*

In truth he wasn't sure he could ask for more than that. Will would give him more, assuredly so, but that would all be a bonus. He remembered Bedelia asking what his intentions were with Will, sounding fearful for the man. Such foolishness. Why would he possibly destroy something he had worked so hard on? A beauty that rivaled the statues in the plazas of Firenze, a marbled mind so bountiful that it could be exploited forever and never bore him, and soon...soon he would be without fear. Soon Will Graham would be utterly and wonderfully perfect.

And he belonged to him.

Hannibal Lecter pulled up to Muskrat Farm in an exuberant mood, stepping out and breathing in the smell of crisp air and manure. The invitation from Verger hadn't been unexpected, but advantageous. Ahead of him was a large barn, behind which sat a stately manor house. The grey

overcast sky seemed to mute the red of the brick and the wood, setting everything in tones. As he surveyed a man stepped from the barn and approached him who seemed affected by this lack of colour, all greys, even his skin. Hannibal regarded him disinterestedly. He assumed this was how the man was normally treated, considering he appeared to take this as a sign to escort Hannibal inside. Hannibal made sure to file the man's utter servitude away for a later date.

Inside the smell tripled, and the faint noises from outside became the atmosphere itself. Snuffling, snorting, squealing. Before him sat what looked like a tall sided wooden pen which was holding, he was sure, a decent amount of pigs. Above, on a platform, stood a man in a long pale coat, glasses set against his slightly chubby face, covering eyes that stared down into the pen, rapt. The underling grunted something Hannibal didn't catch and carried on into the barn. Hannibal took it as an invitation and followed.

He had been treating Margot Verger for three weeks, and so far was immensely enjoying himself. It was always pleasant to garner some new meat to play with, but Margot had offered him even more than simple entertainment. She had offered up a smorgasbord. It seemed, the deeper he dug, that she came from a family of utter madmen. An abusive father, a stone-hearted mother and a brother with a need to turn the world into his own perverted playground, all backed by a substantial family fortune. It was everything he could have asked for.

The wooden construction creaked badly as he ascended, until he was up above the world and looking down on the pigs below. Hannibal smiled; Mason Verger seemed to have constructed a small version of the world Hannibal encountered every day. As he walked forwards he saw that the pig pen below wasn't a whole, instead split into smaller square sections keeping the pigs apart. As he peered down, Verger turned to look at him intensely. Hannibal watched him in return, until Mason did the last thing he'd expected. He smiled and stuck out his hand.

"Dr. Lecter. I'm Mason Verger. So very nice to meet you. Thank you for accepting my invitation."

His voice was slightly nasal and his smile was odorous. Hannibal accepted the handshake and was able to withhold the twitch at his lip when finding the palm under his clammy with sweat.

"I'm prone to old-world politeness," Hannibal said by way of explanation, "Would have seemed rude to say no."

"Since I'm paying for Margot's therapy, I thought I should at the very least meet her psychiatrist."

"I enjoy putting a face to the name," In truth Hannibal just liked to peruse before he bought his meat; he looked back down below to the pushing, squeaking meat that writhed there, "I've never seen pigs like these."

"They're a special breed. Product of many years and many litters.

"Your ground note?"

"Started with the giant forest pig. Six teats and thirty-eight chromosomes, a resourceful feeder and an opportunistic omnivore."

Hannibal smiled, "Just like man. You bred the forest pig with a European wild boar?"

"Among others. You know pigs as well as you know people."

“I do know pigs.”

For a moment the joy of earlier that day, of waking and feeling refreshed and exuberant, came back in force. *For a moment, as he watched Mason Verger eye him like a fox about to run and cause the chase to start, Hannibal imagined Will killing him. How would it be? He wanted to say spectacular, elegant, but now..? He was getting to know Will, know the roots of his pain and his anger. The way that he killed showed the depth of his character, and the well was deep, dark and, until now, unfathomable. So far all Hannibal could be certain of was that it would be violent, brutal and surprising. Will would begin by trying to end it quickly, but part way through he would become entranced by something, some part of the victim’s reaction. Things would change, the death would spread out like blood seeping over tiles, slipping into the runnels and becoming an intricate pattern that Hannibal so loved to watch build.*

So far Will’s attempts, while charming, smacked of hesitancy. There was something holding Will back, something that didn’t allow him to release his inhibitions and believe in his work. Something that made him question his choices. Hannibal detested it; *sometimes he thought he could smell it when Will’s pupil’s dilated and his breathing sped up.* He needed to show Will what it was to live without fear, or his plan would never come to fruition.

Mason Verger seemed like the perfect pig for Will to finally test his teeth on.

“You know, Papa would've loved you,” Mason said with a smile that spoke of a grim need for a father’s acceptance he had never received, “He could feel the face of a hog and tell by the bone structure its genetic make-up. Breeding was very important to our father. Margot really pissed him off with all her button stitching. No breeding there. Do you have a sister, Dr. Lecter?”

“I had a sister,” Hannibal said; the very thought of his darling Mischa having a brother such as Mason made his skin crawl.

“Then you must understand my need to protect Margot,” Mason said with verve, as if a connection had been forged, “Mostly from herself. She's pathological. I'm sure she's told you horrible things that I've done. She distorts reality to maximize her martyrdom.”

“A charade for her resentments?” Hannibal said, enjoying the irony of the statement.

“I have always been the favourite,” Mason said with faux humbleness, “That's why Margot tried to kill me,” he paused as if reacting to a slip of the tongue, watching Hannibal closely, “Does she confess her plots to you?”

“I can't tell you what Margot's confessed to me,” Hannibal said, looking down a the pigs and then back to Mason, “Fortunately for you, I can't tell anyone else.”

Watching Mason smile was akin to the formation of a new species, capable only of cruelty. The specimen before him appeared to be either unable or unaware of its own disturbing qualities, as if surrounded by a fantasy that allowed his abberances to become the norm. It made sense to Hannibal that Mason would hire goons such as the man who had led him from the car to this slaughterhouse, gruff, insular, loyal and easily led. At first he’d thought it nothing but the usual rich man’s vanity, but now Hannibal saw it for what it truly was.

Mason was a delusional psychopath. Hannibal sniffed and enjoyed the scent of neuroses streaming from the man’s successes. It was difficult to watch an empire built on fear and violence exist in such a bubble, knowing that at any moment it could burst. *Pop*.

The only thing more exiting would be to see the carnage when it did.

“Even the worst of us need someone to talk to, Mason,” Hannibal offered, “Have you ever considered therapy for yourself?

A quiet pause filled only with the sound of pigs shuffling and wood creaking. Verger’s odd smile ticked around his mouth like a mouse in a cage.

“Maybe I should,” Verger said, drawing out the diphthong just a little too long, a pause in which they watched each other like a hunter does a deer in the thicket, and then…“Can I have Carlo slaughter you a hog? A token of my appreciation for all that you do for Margot.”

“Please, but I must insist on selecting my own pig,” Hannibal said, making Verger grin, “I always do.”

It was shining but transparent, and spoke volumes. Will felt himself going still, very still as Hannibal handed it to him. An echo of a gift from long ago. It was see through plastic, tacky against his fingers. Hannibal would not leave him until it was tried on. The zip was sticky, new.

“*You made it for me? When?”*

“*Is that important?” Hannibal asked as he brought out his own.*

“*You know that it is,” Will said, looking down, feeling as if he were looking at himself through a fishbowl, “so when you had that suit made for me last year it was for parties, or measurements?”*

“*That’s right,” Hannibal smiled, “you seem annoyed.”*

“*I feel like I might have just been jumping hoops for you longer than I realised.”*

Crimson eyes watched him closely. Will felt himself unable to look away. This was real. This was real? But so much like the dream, so much like a continuation of the fantasy. The nights where he had lain, staring above at the gloom, watching as he sank down, deeper, deeper, to the place where the cage doors opened. Remembering the agony, the manipulation, the betrayal. The dreams that bled over into the real world. The stag pulling forwards to rip the bloodied flesh, throwing a fountain of vital liquid into the air.

For a moment Will wondered how difficult it would be to overpower the man before him.

“*What will you think of Will?” Hannibal asked as he pulled on the nytrile gloves, “Where will you be when we walk through the door?”*

“*I’ll be,” Will smiled slowly, eyes looking into a different space than the one before him, “right where I need to be.”*

Snap awake.

Hiss of breath. *Cold*. His blinking eyes could only see vague shapes in the darkness. Didn’t see it, but knew that his breath condensed milky in the air, then back against his skin as he covered his mouth with a freezing hand.

Will Graham sat up in bed and listened to the house creak. It wasn't a storm so much as the tail end of one. He'd seen on the news that the hurricane would miss coming too far north, but then being miles wide and ferocious allowed even the trailing finger-edges of the beast cause the trees to dance wildly and the dogs to howl when the wind gusted.

His back was cold. Will shivered and lay down, twisting up in his sheets. *Shaking*.

Thump . That noise. *Thump thump thump* . Like footsteps? No, not that, closer, worse. *Thump thump thump thump.* His heart beating loud but slow, enough that it rang in his ears. Will closed his eyes tight and let out a long breath.

This was the plan. Follow the plan. Do not deviate. Any diversion and it falls apart. You fall apart.

Getting up was the only option. A fumbling hand found his dressing gown in the darkness from the memory of where he'd placed it. It wasn't warm enough to cover the chill, but enough to feel like he'd made an effort. The phone was more difficult because he had no memory of where it was, *tried bedside cabinet, tried drawers, tried coffee table,* until the litany of places he'd been the night before sparked his mind and he remembered it was still in his jacket, hanging by the door.

It made him angry to see his hand shook when the turned on the phone in the dark and watched the light jitter around. Will closed his eyes again and took a deep breath. There was no room for fear, fear would get him killed. Fear could be smelled on prey. All he had left was to loose his fear and everything would be perfect.

This is all you have left, isn't it? This is all you have left, and it made him sick.

"*This isn't for you*," he said again and again; for a moment he felt an abrupt sadness catch his chest, squeezing at his heart until the cramp was painful. Choking out a sudden sob Will followed it with a snarl, "*this was never for you,*" he whispered as he opened his contacts and found what he needed.

Stepping outside was easy but stupid. He needed it, that's what he told himself. The icy wind cut at his exposed face and neck, biting as if to maim. *It felt like absolution* . Will listened to the roaring sound of the trees as they bent under the wind, like the waves of the ocean come to claim him. *The tall dark wave that had followed him, towering, already swallowed him*.

He stared at the phone in his hands, sitting like an omen. Like a physical failure it glowed in the dark, showing him the way out he would never take. Names of the people he knew glared at him brightly, their names blurring as the phone twitched around like an agitated firefly. The wind howled around him, consuming conscious thought, making it difficult to imagine what he might do next.

"You can't glamorise him," he muttered, shaking, "you can't dehumanise him either."

He curled in, sitting down on the steps and wrapping his arms around his middle. The phone gripped in his hand, burning. *One call to Jack and this could all be over,* Will thought. Only it couldn't, not yet. The Ripper was free, no ties, to evidence, no jury would convict. *The thought of Hannibal cramped into a cell, a plain, slow death amongst charlatans and mundane pencil pushers trying to keep their tenure in the journals.* It made him ill.

The soft brush of fur and a wet nose against his neck made Will jump. Winston barked, a yelp mixed in with the sound making it somewhat imploring. *Can you smell it in me, boy?* Will watched

as the dog turned a circle and barked out at the darkness as the wind rustled and blew. *Can you hear it in the wind?* Taking hold of the dog's collar only made Winston yap, backing away with a struggle; Will released him too quickly, letting the dog run back inside and join the others holed up in Will's room.

There was no one left. Will forced himself back inside, skin blanched by the cold, torn red by the wind. He half crawled through the door and lay on the ground, kicking it closed and listening as the whistling of the wind increased to a horrible pitch. There was no one left he could talk to, no one left who would understand. No one left to make this right after everything was said and done.

Sitting up was rough; he felt nauseous, dizzy. Worlds were trying to rebuild themselves in his mind, spawning from dreams that had started to fade. Repressing them was of no use. The dreams would always bring them back.

The way it cut when warm hadn't been what he'd expected. His experience before had only ever been on cold and dead. It had a give to it...like a subtle invitation to continue. The blade of the scalpel was incredible, passing as if to cut through the air itself. There was a need to see, a need that had almost been overridden by loathing and hysteria. Now, all he could feel was the numbness of calm and the sounds of the monitor beeping steady. Then a presence at his back, the lips leaning in to settle by his ear and whisper, smiling,

"*You're a natural."*

Upstairs the dogs barked, scared and confused by the sounds from outside. Downstairs Will Graham curled in and tried to ignore the sounds from within. It was only then, as he closed his eyes and prayed to be allowed to sleep without tearing himself apart, that someone began to take shape in his mind. The shadow of a soul caught firmly in the web, just like him.

There had never been a time that Bedelia Du Maurier did not fear Hannibal Lecter, at least to some capacity. She was not a fool, nor did she ever intend to by anyone else's. Things had just…

Things had just gotten out of control. That's what she'd told the jury. It was also what she'd told the court psychiatrist, and the forensic examiner. It was self defence that got out of control, because she'd been frightened, terrified even. Terrified of death and amazed that, in the grip of that fear, she'd been able to carry out such seemingly senseless violence.

It what she'd tried to tell Hannibal when he found her, frantically scrubbing her blood caked hands in the bathroom just off of her office. Her hands had felt raw, aching and constricted, as if she could still feel Neal's throat convulsing around her wrist. Behind her he stood like a spectre, waiting. She had uttered,

"*It just got out of..."*

She hadn't managed any more than that. It was then, as her heartbeat refused to slow from its erratic dance, that she realised it hadn't been Neal Frank she'd feared, it hadn't been the boredom or the loneliness that had forced it to turn out this way, it hadn't been the threat of death. No, what truly scared her was…

"*I can help you tell the version of events you wish to be told."*

The devil's cold hand on her shoulder while his black lips smiled and whispered. The feeling of riveting exhilaration and the high that was now failing from the murder she had committed sat like a stone in her belly, waiting to be claimed by the man who had turned her from a powerful predator into nothing but a puppet. It had been the first moment she realised that she would be a fool if she feared anything more than she feared Hannibal Lecter in her life.

It had taken a long time to build a wall around that fear, corral it, keep it constrained and intelligent. One wrong move and that fear could devour her whole. Sometimes she felt it watching her, like a shadow flitting out of sight as soon as you turned to look. This was her cross to bear, and she would bear it because, if not, it would be a different sort of cross in the end. The sort you found yourself nailed to. This was life, and life was bearable as long as you made it so. Things had moved on.

And then the masochist had arrived to upend her horrific but stable sanity.

"You know you should really think about getting a dog."

She cursed herself that she had jumped at the sound of his voice; she had just returned from the theatre, *a terrifically unoriginal shitshow that she had been talked into attending*, hoping to pour herself a large glass of wine, sit in front of some useless television and drink herself to sleep. Instead, as she toed off her heels and flicked on her living room lights, Bedelia had startled at the sight of Will Graham sitting in her armchair, legs crossed, head tipped to the right to rest his cheek against his hand lazily.

She debated quickly about how to handle this intrusion. She knew time was of the essence, it always was with psychopaths. The scale tipped and she acted: indifference was the outcome.

"I have a perfectly good security system," she said wryly, despite the fact that the *perfectly good security system was obviously not perfect.*

"That's the problem with locks," Will shrugged, "they don't bite."

"I don't need a dog to do my biting for me," she said bravely.

It was a shame the threat only seemed to make the situation worse. Will Graham smiled at her, only it wasn't his face that she saw perform the action. *Bedelia felt the last thing she'd expected from this situation* . Fear of the man absent from the room.

Hannibal's smile was in her house, on another's face.

"Oh dear doctor," Will leaned forwards with his elbows on his knees, hands clasped loosely, "am I going to loose my tongue?"

"I suppose that's meant to intimidate me," she said soberly, despite the alarm bells; she felt like the boogeyman was coming to seal all her escape routes.

"I don't know," Will said, "does death intimidate you? Or is it just the thought of your own premeditated murder?" he observed her slight twitch of the nose and mouth she was careless not to hide better, "No, I don't think it does. We both know there are worse things than death crawling around us, don't we."

"Speak for yourself," she said, walking into the room and draping her long black coat over the back of the couch before sitting down precisely, "I'm not the one with the death wish."

“Interesting turn of phrase,” Will said, brow raised as if to contemplate the morbid humour.

“Why are you here, Will?”

“Don’t you want to know how I found your house?”

“Not really.”

“Fed up of neurotic men abusing your talents to expand their egos, huh?” Will said, raising his brows as he sat back, lounging, “I can sympathise with that. Maybe that’s why you hide behind the veil, while we’re all on the other side.”

“I also said that I hoped you were smarter than this,” she said, unable to hide her tired causticity.

“Being smart doesn’t do you any favours when the beast’s at your back,” Will’s eyes hardened; for a long moment she endured his stare, feeling it reach inside of her, “How exactly did your patient die, Bedelia?”

So many answers, all of them excuses *but one*. She had trained her entire professional career to show no emotion even at the most strenuous of times, when listening to awful things from the mouths of madness that came to visit her office in search of a way out. No time to show disgust or fear or laugh or cry. Just listen, and offer the voice of rationale right back at them. Yet now, when forced to look at eyes who had seen the horrors she had, she found it wasn’t worth the charade.

“I killed him,” she said easily.

Will watched her like a bobcat from the under-brush, as if waiting to see the weakness show.

“The report said he swallowed his tongue,” Will said, eyes narrowed a touch.

“It wasn’t attached at the time. I believed I was defending myself,” it was difficult not to at least try to lend reason to her actions, but the words were hollow; looking at Graham was like looking into a mirror and seeing all your own ugliness thrown back in your face, “And to a point, I was, but beyond that point, it was murder. Hannibal... influenced me to kill my patient, our patient.”

“You weren't coerced?” Will asked

“What he does is not coercion, it is subtle persuasion,” Bedelia noted a slight dulling of the confidence in Will’s posture, a shifting of his eyes as if, for a brief second, he couldn’t bear to look at her, “There’s no blame to shift, unless you want to lie to yourself completely. He paints a subtle picture of glorious euphoria around underlying desires and then he waits to see if the bait takes. He offers freedom, freedom from all that causes you pain, your limitations, your fear, your conscience. But truly it is not freedom, just another set of chains. Ones of his own making.”

It was odd, watching the man who had, until now, been so fervent in his predatory nature slowly sink back into his own skin and seem not to like what he found there. It should have been vilifying, shouldn’t it? It should have been triumphant to watch him fall in the same way she had herself.

Only it wasn’t. Not at all.

“Has he persuaded you to kill anyone, Will?”

The laugh was barely there, more of a puff of breath followed by sardonic smile as Will looked to his left, eyes focusing on the middle distance. The slight shadow on his face made him look younger, almost enough to feel sorry for him. Bedelia wished she'd never had to have this conversation. It wasn't fair. She'd planned to leave town soon, in a few days. Somewhere not even Hannibal could track her down, and now this was landing in her lap to make her remember why.

It should have strengthened her resolve. Instead it simply made her wish she'd never laid eyes on any of them.

"It was self-defence," Will said, and in those words Bedelia heard her own voice parroted from years before.

"You're distorting the truth, Will, to keep who you think you are consistent."

"My truth isn't distorted, Dr. Du Maurier. I know what's true."

"Has Hannibal tried to persuade you to kill anyone that wasn't in self- defence?"

Even though it was only for a moment, the hesitation spoke a thousand words. Bedelia shook her head and smiled. It was all so tragically comical.

"You're already in the trap, aren't you."

"Are you so sure the trap is meant for me?" he asked defensively.

"You're trying to bait a monster that doesn't have anything to lose. Don't you understand? There is nothing he wants more than what he has now. If you imprison him he will revel in his own impervious mind, if you kill him then you'll have to live with that," Will frowned, "neither seems to be exactly what you need Mr. Graham."

"Why are there only two options?" Will asked.

"Because the third option means realising that everything those hands do since you set them free is as if you did them with your own. I have consumed my guilt. It's a part of me that exists without my control. Is that what you want?"

"At this point I feel like guilt would just be joining the party," Will muttered; he looked shaken, despite his bravado. Bedelia wondered what had brought him here, in this desperate attempt to justify himself and his actions.

"If you think you're close to catching him, it's because that's what he wants you to think. Don't fool yourself into believing he's not in control of what's happening."

"Then how do I catch him, doctor?" Will asked.

"Hannibal can get lost in self-congratulation at his own exquisite taste and cunning. Whimsy. That's what will get him caught."

"Sounds like it's something you would benefit from," Will said, eyeing her curiously, "why didn't you? You had a chance to at least cast suspicion on him, let him take the blame, but your lips stayed shut. Why?"

"You know why," she said, her smile jaded.

Standing up and making to leave was enough for Bedelia to know Will understood, probably better than she ever had. Love was a disgustingly powerful rope around one's neck. She wondered when her love for Hannibal had squeezed out its last breath. Now he was more a constant threat in her life that she couldn't understand being without, of not having that need to always check her peripheral vision in case he had capriciously decided he no longer needed her. The thrill of being a beautiful thing in a gilded cage.

"Nothing makes us more vulnerable than loneliness," she said, making Will stop, facing away with his hand against the door frame.

"I'm not alone," Will said softly.

"I know, but that's how he wants you," she said, watching his fingers curl against the wood, "do you really trust that I won't tell Hannibal all about this?"

Words that, disquietingly, garnered a laugh. Will looked back at her over her should and, despite his seeming victory, he looked suddenly old, tired.

"Enjoy your holiday, Doctor Du Maurier," he said before leaving, Bedelia feeling the hairs raise at the nape of her neck, *imagining Hannibal finding her before she had a chance to flee, of being the one to join his host of disturbing masterpieces, of being so close to the surgeon's blade to join the senseless violence*.

Suddenly she didn't feel so god damned charitable.

If there was one thing his daddy had taught him, it was to never let an interloper into the passel. All it took was one horny boar to ruin all that breeding, and then you were into slaughtering drifts because you couldn't know for sure if they were substandard. The same went for humans, he knew that. Genetics were paramount and ubiquitous. Every breed had a bloodline, every breed had a closed studbook. He shook his head and thought of his sister and her obsession with outdoing him, even if it mean perverting her own blood.

"You know what I like about you Carlo?" Mason asked as the pig farmer as he adjusted the suit on the hanger, "You're a great listener. It speaks volumes about your character," he grinned, patting the taller man on the shoulder.

Carlo merely nodded in return. Mason watched the man work, staring down at his masterpiece like a kid on Christmas morning. The smell was more profuse later in the evening. Made his nostrils flare.

"I feel like Stradivarius approaching his worktable. Our father was a pioneer of livestock production. I think he'd have been proud of all my efforts. Now make sure you set that right, Carlo. I want my sister to have a good time with this demonstration. It's only fair, we've been sharing everything since we were born."

The pigs below became agitated at the sound of the chains swinging, clanking together. Mason felt his heart rate speed up. So close, enough that he could smell the success.

“She’s been more rebellious recently, haven’t you noticed?” he said as Carlo tested the mechanics, sending the dangling outfit up and down, “And we all know why,” he sing-songed, watching Carlo work, “it’s looking good. Very good. Wonderful.”

Echoing sounds of grunts and squeals mixed with the faint sounds of sobbing and screaming filtering in from hidden speakers. It was like a beautiful ballet; now all they needed were the dancers.

“Darling Doctor Lecter, do you think he’d like it Carlo? I think he would, we’ll have to try it sometime. But first, find me something I can use, hmm? I seriously doubt he’s as bullet proof as he makes out.”

He licked his lips and let out a smacking sound as they pulled apart.

“Everyone has their weakness.”

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